

# VOLUME D: The Romantic Period



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# The Romantic Period 1785–1832



***Sir Brooke Boothby***, by Joseph Wright. For more information about this image, see the [Image Gallery](#) for this volume.

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1787: Establishment of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves

1789–1815: Revolutionary and Napoleonic period in France.—1789: Revolution begins with the assembly of the Estates General in May and the storming of the Bastille on July 14.—1793: King Louis XVI executed; England joins the alliance against France.—1793–94: Reign of Terror under Robespierre.—1804: Napoleon crowned emperor.—1815: Napoleon defeated at Waterloo

1807: British slave trade outlawed (slavery abolished throughout the empire, the West Indies included, twenty-six years later)

1811–20: The Regency—George, Prince of Wales, acts as regent for George III, who has been declared incurably insane

1819: Peterloo Massacre

1820: Accession of George IV

1830: Accession of William IV

1832: Passage of the Reform Bill in Parliament



The Romantic period, though by far the shortest, is at least as complex and diverse as any other period in British literary history, and it is, tellingly, demarcated differently than any of the other eras that literary historians and anthologists include in their timelines. By convention, the boundaries delimiting those other epochs are either set by the reigns of monarchs (so that we have the “Elizabethan” and “Victorian” ages named for two long-reigning queens) or conceptualized as coinciding with the openings and closings of centuries (as with the volume of this Norton anthology titled “The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries”). The date usually serving as the terminus of the Romantic age, 1832, represents a contrast to this pattern, strongly associated as it is with a signal political event, the first major reform of the British Parliament. A diverse range of dates have been identified as marking off the beginning of the Romantic period, but, almost always, each of these too is associated with an event of tremendous political and social impact. As some scholars tell it, the new era began in 1776, the year Americans declared their independence; others single out 1783, when shattering military defeat at the hands of those Americans dealt a blow to the credibility of Britain’s ruling elites; and many settle on 1789, the year that launched democratic revolution in France, ushered in decades of fierce political unrest in Britain in its turn, and laid the ground for a war between the British and French Empires and their allies that would envelop an entire generation and take almost the whole of the globe as its theater.

Although politics has often provided a framework for the Romantic period, as such arrangements for periodization suggest, the fascination and provocation that this moment of cultural watershed presents for students of literary history have equally to do with another peculiarity in its construction: the Romantic is also the sole period that is named after a literary form, the romance. A great scholarly achievement of the later eighteenth century had been the recovery from obscurity of the medieval romances, previously ignored by literary historians more concerned with classical

influences, and the Romantic period witnessed a reevaluation of those wild verse-tales of adventure, chivalry, and love. Exactly the traits—their barbarous deviations from probability and rationality, their unabashed fictionality, the fantasies they induced in their readers—that once justified medieval romances' fall into oblivion were seen anew, as commentators moved from lauding the room for idealization and visionary imagination that romance had afforded premodern writers to proposing that *modern* literature should follow suit and become, in one sense, more romantic, too. At a moment when real political events themselves seemed to entail improbabilities and impossibilities (for example the common people proclaiming independence from their rulers), that rehabilitation of romance was, in addition, spurred by the period's probing of the relation between what William Godwin, in a subtitle to his 1794 novel *Caleb Williams*, called "Things as They Are" and the alternative worlds that imagination could summon into being. "What is now proved was once, only imagin'd," William Blake declared in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in 1790. His declaration is imbued with the new sense of power that poets, those professional imaginers, were inclined to claim at this moment, when the literary imagination appeared in new ways both to speak to and to guide historical change, and when political philosophy gained a new authority in and through poetry and fiction.

The appeal of romance in this era of rapid change may also have stemmed from the way the scenarios of travel, wandering, and boundary crossing on which romance plots had traditionally depended could now give literary shape to new kinds of mobility and experiences of dislocation. Fascinated by stories of journeys of all kinds, Romantic-era writers and readers displayed a special interest in characters estranged from home or conspicuously on the move—outcasts and exiles, questers or refugees, literary types advertised in the very titles of such texts as Frances Burney's novel *The Wanderer* (1814) or Byron's best-selling poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), based on his own travels and subtitled "a romaunt" (an archaic spelling of "romance"). Writers found that the wayfaring

elements of earlier epic and romance narratives could be repurposed not only as a means through which to test ideals of personal or political independence, or to explore psychological dynamics of transgression and alienation, but as a medium registering the unsettled conditions of modern life. When the Londoner John Keats, in his sonnet "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again," addresses "romance" as "queen of far-away," he underscores the temptation to escapism afforded by romance's embrace of terrains of fantasy. At the same time, like many writers of the period, Keats (whose own brother and sister-in-law would emigrate to Kentucky) repeatedly experiments with romance as a form that, by interweaving the familiar and the exotic, could imaginatively accommodate the real ways "here" and "far away" had become linked in an era of global commerce and empire.

To many observers, the streets of London themselves, crowded with the comings and goings of vehicles and pedestrians, conveyed a dizzying sense of motion, giving urbanites and visitors alike the impression that the pace of life had accelerated: with more than one million inhabitants by 1801, London was far and away Europe's most populous city, and its population would nearly double again by 1840. The expanding metropolis was the capital of a colonial power whose elaborate administrative and trading apparatus was being built up around the globe, including in India, the Caribbean, Australia, and parts of Africa and North America. The advent of industrial machinery in this period created vast wealth for some and altered the nature of work for many, drawing migrants from the countryside to towns and cities, while emigration, ramping up especially after 1800, took huge numbers of Britons to overseas colonies and former colonies. But the largest scale of movement of people in the period involved horrific forms of involuntary displacement. Millions of people were taken from Africa to the Americas and sold as property, and the labor of enslaved persons became a significant engine in the British economy. Meanwhile, the American Revolution and then the Napoleonic Wars, from 1793 to 1815, took British soldiers and sailors to battles far away, then left many surviving veterans shattered,

impoverished, and alone, like William Wordsworth's "Discharged Soldier," a "ghostly figure" returned from the tropics whom Wordsworth encounters wandering the public road.

The recognition that Romantic writers and readers experienced a world at once expanded and complexly interconnected, and that different writers and readers experienced this globality from wildly distinct perspectives, translates into important questions about the geographic and national boundaries implied by designations such as "English literature of the Romantic period." Unsurprisingly, the meanings of "English" and "Englishness" were themselves being contested and reshaped in this moment of new contacts and pressures. In the Romantic period, literary criticism—and literary anthologies—presented national literary traditions as vitally bound up with a concept of national identity and a shared language community (such an understanding helped lay the historical basis for modern anthologies like the Norton). Yet this impetus linking literary expression and national self-definition also propelled writing that asserted Irish or Scottish or Welsh identity in contrast to Englishness, or that foregrounded the complex hybridity "British" identity could enclose. Such non-*English* writing proved among the period's most popular and influential, as well as the most exportable to the United States and elsewhere: Robert Burns's poetry in Scottish dialect; Walter Scott's verse and novels of the Scottish border; Thomas Moore's re-packaging of traditional Irish song; Maria Edgeworth's fiction exploring Irish national identity, written in the time of the unsuccessful 1798 Irish uprising against English rule and the 1801 Act of Union linking Great Britain and Ireland. Likewise in this period, a self-consciously American literature was developing through a lively transatlantic back and forth with British writing.

As scholars have shown a greater wariness of dissolving differences of geography, identity, experience, or language under an all-encompassing rubric of "English" Romanticism, they have also argued for expanding, or re-expanding, a literary canon formerly centered on introspective lyric poems inspired by poets' encounters with objects in or features of the natural world. Abolitionist songs,

ballads and ballad imitations, versified fairy tales (Letitia Landon's "Fairy of the Fountains"), city poems, poems in which nature does not prompt a human speaker's meditation but rather speaks itself (John Clare's "Swordy Well," Anna Barbauld's "Mouse's Petition"), and in prose, travelogues, political pamphlets, Gothic novels, science writing, and historical romances—all now get numbered among the forms of Romantic literature, a more capacious category than it was in the past. And whereas earlier criticism, especially during the third quarter of the twentieth century, developed accounts of a unified Romanticism by extrapolating from the writings of the six male poets that it had singled out for attention (Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge in the first generation, and Byron, Shelley, and Keats in the second), twenty-first-century scholars are readier to stress the friction among these figures, whose poetic and social aspirations divided as well as united them. We are also readier to foreground the crucial role the work of women writers played in making this exciting period what it was: among the most popular and most innovative writers of the period were women novelists, such as Edgeworth, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen; women poets, such as Barbauld and Felicia Hemans; and such women as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and Landon, who made their mark both in poetry and in fiction.

Attention to the international dimensions of British Romantic-period writing has long been trained on the crucial impact of the American and French Revolutions, and the extraordinary and vital circuit of ideas and influences connecting Romanticism in Britain with developments in French and German literature and philosophy. More recent scholarship has demonstrated how much insight into the energies and exchanges shaping the literary production of the period can be gained by including the Caribbean, the Pacific, Africa, and India, as well as North and South America, along with Europe in these frameworks of Romantic-era writing. The writing produced in and around the Haitian Revolution; the political agitation, in London's radical underground, of the Afro-Carib activist Robert Wedderburn; the writing of the Calcutta-based Anglo-Indian writer



Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, drawing on influences from British Romantics like Landon, Byron, and Moore, along with Sanskrit and Persian poetry—all highlight with particular vividness the interaction and recombination of divergent traditions, languages, and styles animating so much of the period's literature.

# REVOLUTION AND REACTION

During the Romantic era, England was experiencing the ordeal of change from a primarily agricultural society, where wealth and power had been concentrated in the landholding aristocracy, to a modern industrial nation. And this change occurred, as mentioned earlier, in a context of revolution—in America, then France, then Haiti—of counterrevolution, of war, of economic cycles of inflation and depression, and of the constant threat to the social structure from imported revolutionary ideologies to which the ruling classes responded by repressing traditional liberties.

English liberals and radicals alike responded with enthusiasm to the early period of the French Revolution, marked by the freeing of prisoners held in the Bastille (a detested jail in Paris) and the passage, by France's newly formed National Assembly, of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, laying out principles of universal liberty and equality. Three important books epitomize the radical social thinking stimulated by the Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) justified the Revolution against Edmund Burke's attack in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791–92) also advocated for England a democratic republic that was to be achieved, if lesser pressures failed, by popular revolution. More important as an influence on Wordsworth and Percy Shelley was Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), which foretold an inevitable but peaceful evolution of society to a final stage in which property would be equally distributed and government would wither away. But English sympathizers dropped off as the Revolution followed its increasingly grim course: the accession to power by Jacobin extremists, intent on purifying the new French Republic by purging it of its enemies; the "September Massacres" of the imprisoned nobility in 1792, followed by the execution of the king and queen; the new republic's invasion of the Rhineland and the Netherlands, which brought England into the war against France; the

guillotining of thousands in the Reign of Terror under Robespierre; and, after the execution in their turn of the men who had directed the Terror, the emergence of Napoleon, first as dictator then as emperor of France. As Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude*,

become Oppressors in their turn,  
Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence  
For one of Conquest, losing sight of all  
Which they had struggled for. . . .

Napoleon, the brilliant tactician whose rise through the ranks of the army had seemed to epitomize the egalitarian principles of the Revolution, had become an arch-aggressor, a despot, and would-be founder of a new imperial dynasty. By 1800 English liberals found they had no side they could wholeheartedly espouse. Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 proved to be the triumph, not of progress and reform, but of reactionary despotisms throughout continental Europe. In this year, accordingly, the debates about the legitimacy of the ruling class and about patrician degeneracy that figures such as Godwin, Paine, and Wollstonecraft had launched in the early 1790s returned with a vengeance.

From start to finish, this was a period of harsh, repressive measures. Public meetings were prohibited in 1795, the right of habeas corpus (the legal principle protecting individuals from arbitrary imprisonment) was suspended for the first time in over a hundred years, and advocates of even moderate political change were charged with treason. Efforts during these war years to repeal the laws that barred Protestants who did not conform to the Anglican Church from the universities and government came to nothing: in the new climate of counterrevolutionary alarm, it was easy to portray even a slight abridgment of the privileges of the Church as a measure that, validating the Jacobins' campaigns to de-Christianize France, would aid the enemy cause. Another early casualty of this counterrevolution was the movement to abolish the slave trade, a cause supported initially by a wide cross-section of

English society. In the 1780s and 1790s numerous writers, both White (Anna Letitia Barbauld, Coleridge, and Hannah More) and Black (Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano), attacked the greed of the owners of the West Indian sugar plantations and detailed the horrors of the traffic in African flesh that provided them with their labor power. But the bloodshed that accompanied political change in France strengthened the hand of apologists for slavery, by making any manner of reform seem the prelude to violent insurrection. Parliament rejected a bill abolishing the trade in 1791, and sixteen years—marked by slave rebellions and by the planters' brutal reprisals—elapsed before it passed a new version of the bill.

The frustration of the abolitionist cause is an emblematic chapter in the larger story of how a reactionary government sacrificed hopes of reform while it mobilized the nation's resources for war. Yet this was the very time when economic and social changes were creating a desperate need for corresponding changes in political arrangements. For one thing, new classes inside England—manufacturing rather than agricultural—were beginning to demand a voice in government proportionate to their wealth. The "Industrial Revolution"—the shift in manufacturing that resulted from the invention of power-driven machinery to replace hand labor—had begun in the mid-eighteenth century with improvements in machines for processing textiles, and was given immense impetus when James Watt redesigned the steam engine in 1765. In the succeeding decades steam replaced wind and water as the primary source of power for all sorts of manufacturing processes, beginning that dynamic of ever-accelerating economic expansion and technological development that we still identify as the hallmark of the modern age. A new laboring population massed in sprawling mill towns such as Manchester, whose population increased by a factor of five in fifty years. In agricultural communities the destruction of home industry was accompanied by the acceleration of the process of enclosing open fields and wastelands (usually, in fact, "commons" that had provided the means of subsistence for entire communities) and incorporating them into larger, privately owned holdings. Enclosure

was by and large necessary for the more efficient methods of agriculture required to feed the nation's growing population (although some of the land that the wealthy acquired through parliamentary acts of enclosure they in fact incorporated into their private estates). But enclosure was socially destructive, breaking up villages, creating a landless class who either migrated to the industrial towns or remained as farm laborers, subsisting on starvation wages and the little they could obtain from parish charity. The landscape of England began to take on its modern appearance—the hitherto open rural areas subdivided into a checkerboard of fields enclosed by hedges and stone walls, with the factories of the cities casting a pall of smoke over vast areas of cheaply built houses and slum tenements. Meanwhile, the population was increasingly polarized into what Benjamin Disraeli later called the “Two Nations”—the two classes of capital and labor, the rich and the poor.

No attempt was made to regulate this shift from the old economic world to the new, since even liberal reformers were committed to the philosophy of *laissez-faire*. Often identified with the moral philosopher Adam Smith's 1776 treatise *The Wealth of Nations* (though Smith's position there is more nuanced), this theory of “let alone” holds that the general welfare can be ensured only by the free operation of economic laws; the government should maintain a policy of strict noninterference and leave people to pursue, unfettered, their private interests. On the one hand, *laissez-faire* thinking might have helped pave the way for the long-postponed emancipation of the slave population of the West Indies; by 1833, when Parliament—having banned the transatlantic traffic in slaves in 1807—finally declared an end to slavery itself across the empire, the anomaly that their unfree labor represented for the new economic and social orthodoxies evidently had become intolerable. But for the great majority of the laboring class at home, the results of *laissez-faire* and the “freedom” of contract it secured were inadequate wages and long hours of work under harsh discipline and in sordid conditions. Investigators' reports on the coal mines, where male and female children of ten or even five years of age were



harnessed to heavy coal-sledges that they dragged by crawling on their hands and knees, read like scenes from Dante's *Inferno*. With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the nation's workforce was enlarged by demobilized troops at the very moment when demand for manufactured goods, until now augmented by the needs of the military, fell dramatically. The result was an unemployment crisis that persisted through the 1820s. Because the workers had no vote and were prevented by law from unionizing, their only recourses were petitions, protest meetings, and riots, to which the ruling class responded with even more repressive measures. The introduction of new machinery into the mills resulted in further loss of jobs, provoking sporadic attempts by the displaced workers to destroy the machines. After one such outbreak of "Luddite" machine breaking, the House of Lords—despite Byron's eloquent protest—passed a bill (1812) making death the penalty for destroying the frames used for weaving in the stocking industry. In 1819 hundreds of thousands of workers organized meetings to demand parliamentary reform. In August of that year, a huge but orderly assembly at St. Peter's Field, Manchester, was charged by saber-wielding troops, who killed at least nine (some historians attribute as many as fifteen deaths to the violence) and injured hundreds more; this was the notorious "Peterloo Massacre," so named with sardonic reference to the Battle of Waterloo.

Suffering was largely confined to the poor, however, while the landed classes and industrialists prospered. So did many merchants, who profited from the new markets opened up as the British Empire expanded aggressively, compensating with victories against the French for the traumatic loss of America in 1783. England's merchants profited, too, thanks to the marketing successes that, over time, converted once-exotic imports from these colonies into everyday fare for the English. In the eighteenth century tea and sugar had been transformed in this way, and in the nineteenth century other commodities followed suit: the Indian muslin, for instance, that was the fabric of choice for gentlemen's cravats and fashionable ladies' gowns, and the laudanum (Indian opium

dissolved in alcohol) that so many ailing writers of the period appear to have found irresistible. The West End of London and new seaside resorts like Brighton became in the early nineteenth century consumers' paradises, sites where West Indian planters and nabobs (a Hindi word that entered English as a name for those who owed their fortunes to Indian gain) could be glimpsed displaying their purchasing power in a manner that made them moralists' favorite examples of nouveau riche vulgarity. The word *shopping* came into English usage in this era. Britain's sense of its modernity and sophistication was reflected not only in such displays of consumer goods, but also in the growth of new institutions and media catering to a public seen as consumers of intellectual culture. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, British scientists were leading participants in a "second scientific revolution" (as Coleridge called it), involving transformative developments in astronomy, geology, chemistry, physics, and biology. While radical publishers circulated cheap editions of treatises whose science challenged religious orthodoxy, at the high end of science publication, elegantly illustrated luxury volumes on such topics as botany or explorers' travels became prized possessions for the well-to-do. Public lecture halls and popular "galleries" showcased science and technology both as useful knowledge and as commercialized entertainment spectacles, further enabling British men and women to understand themselves as participants in progress.

But progress had its limits. French revolutionary principles were feared by English conservatives almost as much for their challenge to the "proper" ordering of the relations between men and women as for their challenge to traditional political arrangements. Yet the account of what it meant to be English that developed in reaction to this challenge—an account emphasizing the special virtues of the English sense of home and family—was in its way equally revolutionary. In an unprecedented way, the war that the English waged almost without intermission between 1793 and 1815 had a "home front." The menaced sanctuary of the domestic fireside became the symbol of what the nation's military might was

safeguarding. What popularity the monarchy held onto during this turbulent period was thus a function not of the two King Georges' traditional exercise of a monarch's sovereign powers but instead of the publicity, tailored to suit this nationalist rhetoric, that emphasized each one's domestic bliss within a "royal family." Conceptions of proper femininity altered as well under the influence of this new idealization and nationalization of the home, this project (as Burke put it) of "binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties."

And that alteration both put new pressures on women and granted them new opportunities. As in earlier English history, women in the Romantic period were provided only limited schooling, were subjected to a rigid code of sexual behavior, and (especially after marriage) were bereft of legal rights. In this period women began, as well, to be deluged by books, sermons, and magazine articles that insisted vehemently on the physical and mental differences between the sexes and instructed women that, because of these differences, they should accept that their roles in life involved child rearing, housekeeping, and nothing more. (Of course, in tendering this advice promoters of female domesticity conveniently ignored the definitions of duty that industrialists imposed on the poor women who worked in their mills.) Yet a paradoxical byproduct of the connections that the new nationalist rhetoric forged between the well-being of the state and domestic life was that the identity of the patriot became one a woman might attempt, with some legitimacy, to claim. Within the framework created by the new accounts of English national identity, a woman's private virtues now had a public relevance. They had to be seen as crucial to the nation's welfare. Those virtues might well be manifested in the work of raising patriotic sons, but, as the thousands of women in this period who made their ostensibly natural feminine feelings of pity their alibi for participation in abolitionism demonstrated, they could be turned to nontraditional uses as well.

The new idea that, as the historian Linda Colley has put it, a woman's place was not simply in the home but also in the nation

could also justify or at least extenuate the affront to proper feminine modesty represented by publication—by a woman's entry into the public sphere of authorship. "Bluestockings"—educated women—remained targets of masculine scorn. This became, nonetheless, the first era in literary history in which women writers began to compete with men in their numbers, sales, and literary reputations. These female authors had to tread carefully, to be sure, to avoid suggesting that (as one male critic fulminated) they wished the nation's "affectionate wives, kind mothers, and lovely daughters" to be metamorphosed into "studious philosophers" and "busy politicians." And figures like Wollstonecraft, who in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* grafted a radical proposal about gender equality onto a more orthodox argument about the education women needed to be proper mothers, remained exceptional. Later women writers tended cautiously to either ignore her example or define themselves against it.

Only in the Victorian period would Wollstonecraft's cause of women's rights rally enough support for substantial legal reform to begin, and that process would not be completed until the twentieth century. In the early nineteenth century the pressures for political reform focused on the rights of men, as distinct from women. From 1785 on, the year in which Prime Minister William Pitt (who would soon shift his political allegiances) proposed in vain a bill for parliamentary reform, middle-class and working-class men, entering into strategic and short-lived alliances, made the restructuring of the British electoral system their common cause. Finally, at a time of acute economic distress, the first Reform Bill was passed in 1832. It did away with the rotten boroughs (depopulated areas whose seats in the House of Commons were at the disposal of a few noblemen), redistributed parliamentary representation to include the industrial cities, and extended the franchise. Although about half the middle class, almost all the working class, and all women remained without a vote, the principle of the peaceful adjustment of conflicting interests by parliamentary majority had been firmly established.

Reform was to go on, by stages, until Britain acquired universal adult suffrage in 1928.



# THE NEW POETRIES: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Writers working in this period, from 1785 to 1832, did not think of themselves as constituting a group of "Romantic" authors. It was Victorian critics who first wrote of the previous generation as the Romantics and promoted the term as a description for a period of recent, modern rather than premodern, history. Contemporaries, by contrast, treated these writers as independent individuals or else grouped them (usually maliciously, but with some basis in fact) into a number of separate "schools" or "sects": the "Lake School" of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Robert Southey (a "sect of poets," the critic Francis Jeffrey sniped, determined to be "*dissenters* from the established systems in poetry and criticism" and valuing themselves highly "for having broken loose from the bondage of ancient authority"); the "Cockney School," a derogatory term for vulgar Londoners Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and associated writers who had pretensions beyond their station, including Keats; and the impious "Satanic School" of Leigh Hunt (again), Percy Shelley, and Byron. At the start of the period, the satirist Richard Polwhele also practiced this name calling as he cataloged the sphere of "female literature": the aim of his 1797 *The Unsex'd Females* was, by naming and shaming, to firmly distinguish the virtuous lady writers of his moment from the "Amazonian band" formed by Wollstonecraft and her followers, a group who, so Polwhele complained, had sacrificed their feminine charms for lead roles in revolutionary polemicizing.

The proliferation of schools and sects suggests the fault lines running through this fractious literary world. Where agreement could be found was around the proposition that this was a watershed moment in literary history. "Literature, well or ill conducted," the satirist Thomas James Mathias proclaimed in the book that inspired Polwhele's, "is the great engine by which . . . all civilized states must ultimately be supported or overthrown." Radicals concurred with

conservatives like Mathias in this conviction that literature was where the action was—that literature in effect *was* action—even as they disagreed on the meaning to be ascribed to that very term (a term formerly synonymous with learning in general, only in this period did *literature* begin to settle down into that modern meaning that confines it exclusively to artistic expression, works of the imagination particularly). Introducing *The New Cambridge History of the English Romantic Period*, James Chandler highlights, as a defining characteristic of the Romantic age, how often this era's most talented men gravitated to poetry in particular. They confirmed poetry's elevated cultural status by abandoning other careers, the ministry in Coleridge's case, the law in Sir Walter Scott's, medicine in Keats's. Even George Canning, Tory leader of Britain's House of Commons, published in 1823 a *Collected Poems*. In his 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth unfavorably contrasted what the "Man of Science" could do as a benefactor of humanity with what the "Poet" could, whose vocation it was to "bind together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth and over all time." "The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry," Percy Shelley declared.

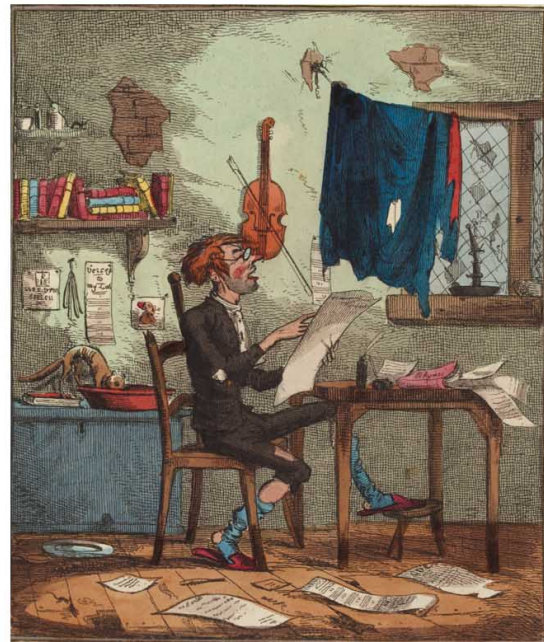
The "most eccentric feature of this entire culture," literary historian Stuart Curran suggests, was that it was "simply mad for poetry." To a degree inconceivable in the twenty-first century, poetry back then penetrated everyday life, as something appearing in daily papers alongside news stories and notices of bankruptcies, deaths, and marriages, and as something to be memorized, sung, transcribed into commonplace books, and made the basis of parlor games on long winter's evenings. The calling of poet beckoned to many: among those hordes of devoted readers, many were eager—too eager, their reviewers complained—to become authors in turn, imagining that verse might provide their springboard to fame. If those enthusiasms laid the ground for confident declarations like Shelley's and Wordsworth's, they also, inevitably, generated a backlash, the more so as the new poetries of the Romantic period

rode to this cultural prominence on the back of a media culture that at this moment was reaching increasing numbers of readers more quickly than ever before. Indeed, as Mathias's word *engine* suggests, with the expansion of modern publishing, it had begun to appear as though modern writing, too, had started to conform to the accelerated production rhythms of the Industrial Revolution. (The nervousness aroused by these developments, anticipations of the twentieth century's mass culture, is also registered in Wordsworth's Preface, which proposes as one cause of the "almost savage torpor" found among Wordsworth's countrymen and women, city-dwellers especially, the "rapid communication of intelligence" provided by the new popular press.) The spectacle of new sorts of people enlisting as authors and the multiplication of new venues for their writings generated gloomy warnings about overproduction and an accompanying debasement of artistic standards.

The genius poet was therefore shadowed throughout the Romantic period's literary discussion by a less admirable double, the Grub Street hack. *Poet* could in this era designate the visionary and universal benefactor profiled in Wordsworth's Preface and Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, but it also evoked an impoverished and pretentious truant from a more honest trade, a misguided *romantic scribbler*. (That last phrase, often bandied about in this era, reminds us that even as the term *romantic* became synonymous with an admirable responsiveness to the promptings of imagination, it never completely shed its association with a deplorable and impractical deviation from common sense.) As Mary Robinson mischievously pointed out, it was a mistake to equate "the airy throne / Of bold imagination, rapture fraught / Above the herds of mortals" with a desolate mountaintop or isolated green dell, even though the period's poetic speakers tended to picture themselves in such sublime settings. The poet's haunt was in mundane reality likely to be a shabby, low-rent attic. Many motives drove the poets who in this era tried to make poetry new by reviving what was old and who thereby contrived to bypass the eighteenth-century poets whose heirs they were supposed to be: their medievalisms and primitivisms were, for a start, reactions against the neoclassical canons of good

taste, as well as expressions of a new nationalism. But certainly ideas about the literary past's exemption from the commercial pressures of the present also helped make the outmoded old romances a radically new source of inspiration for this period, precisely because of rather than despite their historical distance. The energy invested at this moment in the scholarly investigation and poetic imitation of the ballads being sung or chanted by common people in the streets and fields suggests something similar. It registers the fascination that the participants in literate culture who listened in on these performances were inclined to ascribe to a cultural form whose origins predated the invention of the printing press and the advent of a print market. The ballad was transmitted by word of mouth and not by commercial exchange.

The double image of the poet—product of an era that both idealized poetry and fretted over its standing in modern, commercial society—is an important context for the questions centering Wordsworth's 1802 Preface, his retroactive statement of the principles guiding him in the poems he contributed to *Lyrical Ballads*. "What is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet?" The questions were the more urgent because in a fractious period, there was increased pressure on the aesthetic sphere to act as a site in which human beings could rediscover the commonalities linking them as humans, as Wordsworth's definition of the poet as a figure of unification, "bind[ing] together . . . the vast empire of human society," suggests. One way to approach the period's new poetics and isolate some of the distinctive trends that were precipitated out of a welter of reforms and radical innovations is to start by tracing the shifting conceptions of poet and poetry that emerged then. If by taking this approach we take our cue from Wordsworth's Preface, we should also acknowledge that his manifesto for a new poetics can be deemed representative only to a limited extent. Wordsworth would have wished it otherwise, but during this era of revolution definitions of good poetry, like definitions of the good society, were sure to create as much contention as consensus.



**Contrasting Views of the Romantic Poet.** On the left, Henry Fuseli, "The Poet's Vision," unused design for frontispiece to William Cowper's *Poems* (1807). On the right, Henry Heath, "Fine Arts, Pt. 1: Poetry," published August 8, 1826.

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### ***Concepts of the Poet and the Poem***

Seeking a stable foundation on which social institutions might be constructed, eighteenth-century British philosophers had devoted much energy to demonstrating that human nature must be everywhere the same, because it everywhere derived from individuals' shared sensory experience of an external world that could be objectively represented. As the century went on, however, philosophers began emphasizing—and poets began developing a new language for—individual variations in perception and the capacity the receptive consciousness has to filter and to re-create reality. This was a shift Wordsworth registered when in his Preface he located the source of a poem not in outer nature but in the psychology of the individual poet. What distinguished the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* from



the popular poetry of the day, Wordsworth declared, vindicating his own departures from those norms, is that "[t]he feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling." Wordsworth maintained, in continuation, that "[A]ll good poetry," was, at the moment of composition, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Other contemporary discussions of poetry concurred with this account by referring likewise to the mind, emotions, and imagination of the poet for the origin, content, and defining attributes of a poem. "The poet, the man of strong feelings, gives us only an image of his mind, . . . marking the impression which nature had made on his own heart," Wollstonecraft wrote in an essay that appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* the year before the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Though Romantic poetry is interchangeable for many modern readers with "nature poetry" (an equation that William Godwin, her widower, endorsed when he reprinted Wollstonecraft's essay under a new title, "On Poetry, and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature"), this characterization of Romantic poetics risks downplaying the poets' emphatic attention to the operations of consciousness. Certainly, many poets participated enthusiastically in the touring of picturesque scenery that was a new leisure activity of their age. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, the Lake School, even set up their households in the midst of that scenery, announcing in their residential arrangements as well as their works their antipathy to "the increasing accumulation of men in cities" and faith in the restorative powers of a benevolent Nature. Even so, it is fair to say that when the great Romantic lyrics—Smith's *Beachy Head*, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," Keats's "Nightingale"—remark on an aspect of the natural scene, this attention to the external world serves only as stimulus to the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking.

Infused with this emphasis, the lyric poem written in the first person, which for much of literary history was regarded as a minor kind, thus became for many among the Romantics a major form and was often described as the most essentially poetic of all the genres. And in many Romantic lyrics the "I" is no longer a conventionally

typical lyric speaker, such as the Petrarchan lover or Cavalier gallant of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century love poems, but one who shares recognizable traits with the poet. The experiences and states of mind expressed by the lyric speaker often accord closely with the known facts of the poet's life.

This reinvention of the lyric complicated established understandings of the gender of authorship. It may not be an accident, some critics suggest, that Wordsworth in his Preface defines poetry as "the real language of men" and the Poet as a "man speaking to men": Wordsworth, who began to publish when women such as Robinson and Charlotte Smith occupied the vanguard of the new personal poetry, might have decided that to establish the distinctiveness of his project he needed to counterbalance his emphasis on his feelings with an emphasis on those feelings' "manly" dignity. This is not to say that women writers' relationship to the new ideas about poetry was straightforward either. In one of her prefaces Smith says that she anticipates being criticized for "bringing forward 'with querulous egotism,' the mention of myself." For many female poets the other challenge those ideas about poetry posed might have consisted in their potential to reinforce the old, prejudicial idea that their sex—traditionally seen as creatures of feeling rather than intellect—wrote about their own experiences because they were capable of nothing else. For male poets the risks of poetic self-revelation were different—and in some measure they were actively seized by those who, like Coleridge and Percy Shelley, intimated darkly that the introspective tendency and emotional sensitivity that made someone a poetic genius could also lead him to melancholy and madness.

It was not only the lyric that registered these new accounts of the poet. Byron confounded his contemporaries' expectations about which poetic genre was best suited to self-revelation by inviting his audience to equate the heroes of *Childe Harold*, *Manfred*, and *Don Juan* with their author, and to see these fictional protagonists' experiences as disclosing the deep truths of his secret self. Wordsworth's *Prelude* represents an extreme instance of this tendency to self-reference. Though the poem, half a century in the

making, is of epic length and seriousness, its subject is not, as is customary in an epic, history on a world-changing scale but the growth of the poet's mind: "a thing unprecedented in Literary history that a man should talk so much about himself," Wordsworth admitted.

### ***Spontaneity and the Impulses of Feeling***

In traditional poetics, poetry had been regarded as supremely an art—an art that in modern times was practiced by poets who had assimilated classical precedents, were aware of the "rules" governing the kind of poem they were writing, and (except for the happy touches that, as Alexander Pope said, are "beyond the reach of art") deliberately employed tested means to achieve premeditated effects on an audience. But in her 1797 *Monthly Magazine* essay, Wollstonecraft foretold a shift in aesthetic doctrine when she wrote that "[t]he silken wings of fancy are shrivelled by rules," and that "a desire of attaining elegance of diction occasions an attention to words, incompatible with sublime, impassioned thoughts." In Wordsworth's account in the Preface, although the composition of a poem originates from "emotion recollected in tranquillity" and may be preceded and followed by reflection, the immediate act of composition must be spontaneous—impulsive, artless, and free from rules. Keats listed as an "axiom" a similar proposition—that "if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."

On occasion in this period's discussions of poetics, this interest in a poetry that came naturally could act in concert with that nostalgia, already discussed, which abandoned the prosaic here-and-now for the more romantic possibilities housed in a remote, preliterate past. For instance, for many poets of the period, the ancient bard, a composite figure resembling at once the biblical prophets, Homer, Milton, and the harp-playing patriots whom eighteenth-century antiquarians had located in a legendary Dark Ages Britain, was a charismatic role model. Imagining the songs a bard might have sung in long-ago times made it easier to conceive an alternative to the

mundane language of modernity—a natural, oral poetry, blissfully unconscious of modern decorums and artificial conventions and sublimely irreducible to rule or measure. (Though they chafed against this expectation, writers from the rural working class—Robert Burns and later John Clare—could be expected, by virtue of their perceived distance from the restraint and refinement of civilized discourse, to play a comparable role inside modern culture, that of peasant poet or natural genius.) When, after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, writers like Byron and Percy and Mary Shelley traveled to Italy, taking these bardic ideals with them, they became enthralled with the arts of the *improvisatore* and *improvisatrice*, men and women whose electrifying oral performances of poetry involved no texts but those of immediate inspiration. One writer who praised and emulated that rhapsodic spontaneity, Percy Shelley, thought it “an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study.” He suggested instead that these were the products of an unconscious creativity: “A great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother’s womb.”

The emphasis in this period on unlabored art and on the spontaneous activity of the imagination producing it, and the premium placed on the immediacy of the relationship between author and poem, are linked to a belief in the essential role of passion. According to this view (which connects the literary productions of the Romantic period to the poetry and fiction of sensibility written earlier in the eighteenth century), the intuitive feelings of “the heart” had to supplement the judgments of the purely logical faculty, “the head.” “Deep thinking,” Coleridge wrote, “is attainable only by a man of deep feeling”; hence, “a metaphysical solution that does not tell you something in the heart is grievously to be suspected as apocryphal.”



**The Bard.** Frontispiece by Thomas Rowlandson for Edward Jones, *The Bardic Museum of Primitive British Literature* (1802), a collection of traditional Welsh melodies. Rowlandson pictures the bard as a figure unifying his community.

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***Glorification of the Ordinary***

In his 1818 lecture "On the Living Poets" Hazlitt declared the poetry of the Lake School, with Wordsworth at its head, to be the literary equivalent of the French Revolution, a translation of political change into poetical experiment. "Kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere. . . . The paradox [these poets] set out with was that all things are by nature, equally fit subjects for poetry; or that if there is any preference to give, those that are the meanest [that is, most humble] and most unpromising are the best."

Furthermore, as Hazlitt pointed out, the Lake School had done more than take the subjects of serious poems from the lives of humble country folk; it overtly elicited a genteel audience's sympathies for the disgraced, outcast, and delinquent—"convicts, female vagrants, gypsies . . . idiot boys and mad mothers," in Hazlitt's list. To some extent Hazlitt's analogizing between poetic and political experiments suggests more about him than the living poets he discusses: an avid youthful reader of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he sounds as though he took to heart the Swiss-French philosopher's advocacy of a simplicity of manners against aristocratic corruption. Still, Hazlitt would have found support for his characterization of the Lake School from Wordsworth's statement in the Preface that his aim in *Lyrical Ballads* was "to choose incidents and situations from common life." For Wordsworth's polemical purposes, it was in "humble and rustic life" that a natural language—"a language really spoken by men" and "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature"—was to be found, and the speech of rustics was in the Preface promoted as a cure for the ailments of the overcivilized.

Hazlitt would have known as well that later eighteenth-century writers had already experimented with the simple treatment of simple subjects. Burns had with great success represented "the rural scenes and rural pleasures of [his] natal Soil," and in a language aiming to be true to the rhythms of the Scots language. Women poets, too—Barbauld, Robinson—assimilated to their poems the subject matter of everyday life. Many later eighteenth-century writers had taken their cue from the stark simplicity of the popular ballad: the ballad's appeal for an up-market, metropolitan readership,

capitalized on by eighteenth-century collections like Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, was in a part a function of the contrast between the primitive plainness and outright crudity of these song traditions and the tame, elaborate poetic diction defining poetry's modern milieu.

Once it had arrived on this scene Wordsworth's Preface of 1802 underwrote such poetic practice with a theory that inverted the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres, subjects, and styles. It elevated humble life and the plain style, which in earlier theory were appropriate only for the pastoral, the genre at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy, into the principal subject and medium for poetry in general. Byron reacted with scorn to this poetic program and facetiously summoned ghosts from the eighteenth century to help him protest against what *he* perceived as Wordsworth's bathos:

"Peddlers," and "Boats," and "Wagons"! Oh! ye  
shades  
Of Pope and Dryden, are we come to this?

Yet Wordsworth's project was not simply to represent the world as it is but, as he explained in his Preface, to throw over "situations from common life . . . a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect." No one can read his poems without noticing the reverence with which he invests words that for earlier writers had been derogatory—words such as *common, ordinary, everyday, humble*. Wordsworth's aim was to shatter the lethargy of custom so as to refresh our sense of wonder in the everyday and the lowly.

In the eighteenth century Samuel Johnson had said that "wonder is a pause of reason"—"the effect of novelty upon ignorance." But for many Romantics, to arouse in the sophisticated mind that sense of wonder presumed to be felt by the ignorant and the innocent—to renew the universe, Percy Shelley wrote, "after it has been blunted by reiteration"—was a major function of poetry. Commenting on the imaginative quality of Wordsworth's early verse, Coleridge remarked



in *Biographia Literaria*: "To combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar . . . this is the character and privilege of genius." Contributing to this poetry of the child's-eye view, Barbauld wrote a poem centered on an observer's effort to imagine the unknowable perspective of a being for whom thought and sensation are not yet begun—a "little invisible being who is expected soon to become visible" but is still in its mother's womb.

### ***The Supernatural, the Romance, and Psychological Extremes***

There was a counterpoint to this poetry devoted to reviving the wonder of the familiar—"characters and incidents such as will be found in every village and its vicinity"—and proposing the authenticity of that local knowledge that long familiarity brings: a poetry that instead was founded on frank violation of natural laws and the ordinary course of events and that thereby cultivated the romantic in the understanding of that term that was to the forefront during the Romantic period itself. Coleridge contrasts these two sorts of poem when in *Biographia Literaria* he describes the division of labor organizing his collaboration with Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads*: his responsibility was poetry in which "the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural, or at least romantic." Stories of bewitchings, hauntings, and possession—shaped by antiquated treatises on demonology, folklore, and Gothic novels—supplied Coleridge in poems such as *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, and "Kubla Khan" with the means of impressing on readers a sense of occult powers and unknown modes of being.

Poems like these, as Coleridge's epithet "romantic" suggests, were often grouped together by contemporaries under the medievalizing rubric "romance." On the one hand romances were writings that turned, in their quest for settings conducive to supernatural happenings, to distant pasts, faraway, exotic places, or both—Keats's "perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" or the China of "Kubla Khan." On the other hand romance also named a homegrown, native tradition of literature, made unfamiliar and alien by the



passage of time. For many authors, starting with Horace Walpole, whose *Castle of Otranto* (1764) began the tradition of Gothic fiction, writing under the banner of romance meant reclaiming their national birthright: a literature of imagination— associated, above all, with Spenser and the Shakespeare of fairy magic and witchcraft—that had been forced underground by the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason. As Byron had done in his romance *Childe Harold*, Keats drew on a stanzaic form associated with Spenser in writing *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the poem in which he proved himself a master of that Romantic mode that establishes a medieval setting for events violating our sense of realistic probability. The Romantic period’s “medieval revival” was also promoted by women: Robinson, for instance (author of “Old English,” “Monkish,” and “Gothic” Tales), as well as Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and others, women who often matched the arch-medievalist Sir Walter Scott in the historical learning they brought to their compositions.

The “addition of strangeness to beauty” that Walter Pater near the end of the nineteenth century would identify as a key Romantic tendency is seen not only in this concern with the exotic and archaic landscapes of romance but also in an interest in the mysteries of mental life and determination to investigate psychological extremes. Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey shared an interest in dreams and nightmares and in the altered consciousness they experienced under their addiction to opium. In his odes, as in the quasi-medieval “ballad” “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” Keats recorded strange mixtures of pleasure and pain with extraordinary sensitivity, pondering the destructive aspects of sexuality and the erotic quality of the longing for death. And Byron made repeated use of the fascination of the forbidden and the appeal of the terrifying yet seductive Satanic hero.

There were, of course, writers who resisted these poetic engagements with fantasized landscapes and strange passions. Significant dissent came from some women writers, who, given accounts of their sex as especially susceptible to the delusions of romantic love, had particular reason to continue the Enlightenment program and promote the rational regulation of emotion. Barbauld wrote a poem gently advising the young Coleridge not to prolong his

stay in the “fairy bower” of romance but to engage actively with the world as it is. Often satirical when she assesses characters who imagine themselves the pitiable victims of their own powerful feelings, Jane Austen had her heroine in *Persuasion*, while conversing with a melancholy, Byron-reading young man, caution him against overindulgence in Byron’s “impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony” and “prescribe” to him a “larger allowance of prose in his daily study.” And yet this heroine, having “been forced into prudence in her youth,” has “learned romance as she grew older.” The reversal of the sequence that usually orders the story line of female socialization suggests a receptivity to romance’s allure—the allure of the improbable—that links Austen to the spirit of the age.

### ***Individualism and Alienation***

Another feature of Byron’s poetry that attracted notice and, in some quarters, censure was its insistence on his or his hero’s self-sufficiency. Hazlitt, for instance, borrowed lines from Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* to object to Byron’s habit of spurning human connection “[a]s if a man were author of himself, / And owned no other kin.” The audacious individualism that Hazlitt questions in this passage from *The Spirit of the Age* was, however, central to the celebrations of creativity occupying many Romantic-period writers. Indeed, in the Preface, Wordsworth had already characterized his poetic experimentation in *Lyrical Ballads* as an exercise in artistic self-sufficiency. The Preface has been read as a document in which Wordsworth, proving himself a self-made man, arranges for his disinheritance—arranges to cut himself off, he says, “from a large portion of the phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets.” The German philosophers who generated many of the characteristic ideas of European Romanticism had likewise developed an account of how individuals might author and create themselves. In the work of Immanuel Kant and others, the human mind was described as creating the universe it perceived and so creating its own experience. Mind is “not passive,” Kant’s admirer Coleridge wrote, but “made in

God's image, and that too in the sublimest sense—the Image of the *Creator*.” And Wordsworth declared in *The Prelude* that the individual mind “[e]ven as an agent of the one great mind, / creates, creator and receiver both.” The Romantic period, the epoch of free enterprise, imperial expansion, and boundless revolutionary hope, was also an epoch of individualism in which philosophers and poets alike put an extraordinarily high estimate on human potentialities.

In representing this expanded scope for individual initiative, much poetry of the period redefined heroism and made a ceaseless striving for the unattainable its crucial element. Viewed by moralists of previous ages as sin or lamentable error, longings that can never be satisfied—in Percy Shelley's phrase, “the desire of the moth for a star”—came to be revalued as the glory of human nature. “Less than everything,” Blake announced, “cannot satisfy man.” Discussions of the nature of art developed similarly. The German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel's proposal that poetry “should forever be becoming and never be perfected” supplied a way to understand the unfinished, “fragment” poems of the period (“Kubla Khan” most famously) not as failures but instead as confirmations that the most poetic poetry was defined as much by what was absent as by what was present: the poem, in this understanding, was a fragmentary trace of an original conception that was too grand ever to be fully realized. This defiant attitude toward limits also made many writers impatient with the conceptions of literary genre they inherited from the past. The result was that, creating new genres from old, they produced an astonishing variety of hybrid forms constructed on fresh principles of organization and style: “elegiac sonnets,” “lyrical ballads,” the poetic autobiography of *The Prelude*, Percy Shelley's “lyric drama” of cosmic reach, *Prometheus Unbound*, and (in the field of prose) the “historical novels” of Scott and the complex interweaving of letters, reported oral confessions, and interpolated tales that is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

In this context many writers' choice to portray poetry as a product of solitude and poets as loners might be understood as a means of reinforcing the individuality of their vision. (The sociability of the extroverted narrator of *Don Juan*, who is forever buttonholing

“the gentle reader,” is exceptional—Byron’s way of harkening back to the satire of the eighteenth century.) And the appeal that nature poetry had for many writers of the period can be attributed to a determination to idealize the natural scene as a site where the individual could find freedom from social laws, an idealization that was easier to sustain when nature was, as often in the era, represented not as cultivated fields but as uninhabitable wild wastes, unplowed uplands, caves, and chasms. Rural *community*, threatened by the enclosures that were breaking up village life, was a tenuous presence in poetry as well.

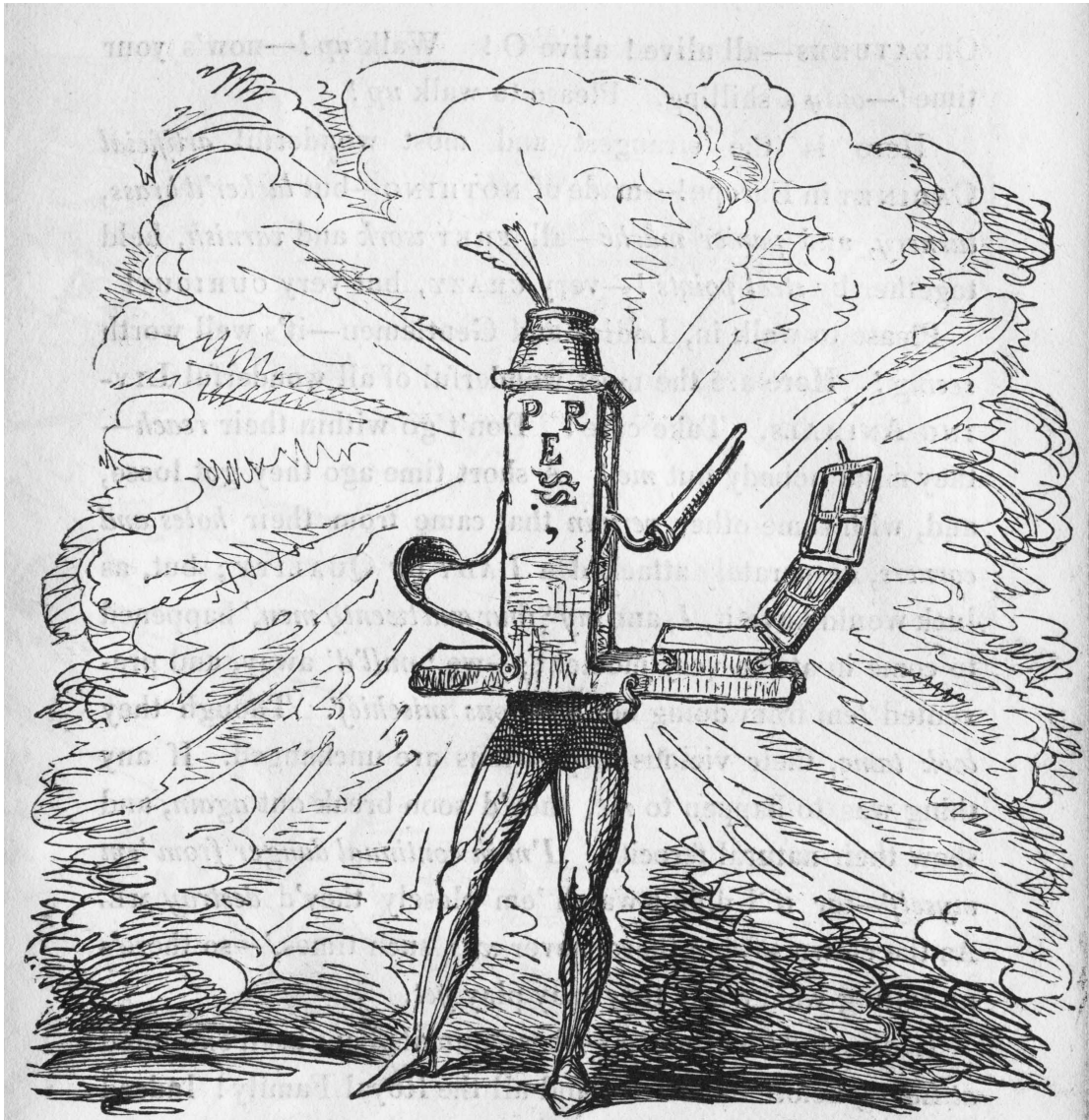
Wordsworth’s imagination is typically released, for instance, by the sudden apparition of a single figure, stark and solitary against a natural background; the terms *solitary*, *by one self*, *alone* sound through his poems. In the poetry of Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron (before *Don Juan* launched Byron’s own satire on Byronism), the desolate landscapes are often the haunts of disillusioned visionaries and accursed outlaws, figures whose thwarted ambitions and torments connect them, variously, to Cain, the Wandering Jew, Satan, and even Napoleon. A variant of this figure is Prometheus, the hero of classical mythology, who is Satan-like in setting himself in opposition to God, but who, unlike Satan, is the champion rather than the enemy of the human race. Mary Shelley subjected this hero, central to her husband’s mythmaking, to ironic rewriting in *Frankenstein*: Victor Frankenstein, a “Modern Prometheus,” is far from championing humankind. For other women writers of the period, and for Shelley in her later novels, the equivalent to these half-charismatic, half-condemnable figures of alienation is the woman of “genius.” In a world in which—as Wollstonecraft complained in the *Rights of Woman*—“all women are to be levelled by meekness and docility, into one character of . . . gentle compliance,” the woman who in “unfeminine” fashion claimed a distinctive individuality did not gain authority but risked ostracism. As for the woman of genius, in writings by Robinson, Hemans, and Landon particularly, her story was often told as a modern variation on ancient legends of the Greek Sappho, the ill-fated female poet who had triumphed in poetry but died of love. Pressured by the emergent Victorianism of the 1820s

and playing it safe, Hemans especially was careful to associate genius with self-inflicted sorrow and happiness with a woman's embrace of her domestic calling.

# WRITING IN THE MARKETPLACE AND THE LAW COURTS

Even Romantics who wished to associate literature with isolated poets holding mute converse with their souls had to acknowledge that in real life the writer did not dwell in solitude but confronted, and was accountable to, a crowd. For many commentators the most revolutionary aspect of the age was the spread of literacy and the dramatic expansion of the potential audience for literature. This revolution, like the revolution in France, occasioned a conservative reaction: the worry, frequently expressed as books ceased to be written exclusively for an elite, that this bigger audience (by 1830, about half of England's population of fourteen million) would be less qualified to judge or understand what it read. Beginning in the 1780s, more members of the working classes had learned to read as a result of lessons provided in Sunday schools (informal sites for the education of the poor that long antedated state-supported schools). At the same time reading matter became more plentiful and cheaper, thanks to innovations in retailing—the cut-rate sales of remaindered books and the spread of circulating libraries where volumes could be “rented”—and thanks to technological developments. By the end of the period, printing presses were driven by steam engines, and the manufacture of paper had been mechanized; publishers had mastered publicity, the art (as it was called) of “the puff.” Surveying the consequences of these changes, Coleridge muttered darkly about that “misgrowth,” “a Reading Public,” making it sound like something freakish and pathological. Books had become a big business, one enrolling increasing numbers of individuals who found it possible to do without the assistance of wealthy patrons and who, accordingly, looked to this public for their hopes of survival. A few writers became celebrities, invested with a glamour that formerly had been reserved for royalty and that we nowadays save for movie stars. This was the case for the best-selling Byron, particularly, whose enthusiastic public

could by the 1830s purchase dinner services imprinted with illustrations from his life and works.



**Printing Press.** George Cruikshank's image of a printing press in human form, superhero and harbinger of modern liberty, opens William Hone's satiric pamphlet *The Political Showman—At Home!* (1821).

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How such popular acclaim was to be understood and how the new reading public that bestowed it (and took it away) could possibly be reformed or monitored when, as Coleridge's term *misgrowth*

suggests, its limits and composition seemed unknowable: these were pressing questions for the age. Opponents of the French Revolution and political reform at home pondered a frightening possibility: if “events . . . [had] made us a world of readers” (as Coleridge put it, thinking of how newspapers had proliferated in response to the political upheavals), it might also be true that readers could *make* events in turn, that the new members of the audience for print would demand a part in the drama of national politics. Conservatives were well aware of arguments conjecturing that the Revolution had been the result of the invention of the printing press three centuries before. They certainly could not forget that Paine’s *Rights of Man*—not the reading matter for the poor the Sunday-school movement had envisioned—had sold an astonishing two hundred thousand copies in a year.

However, the British state had lacked legal provisions for the prepublication censorship of books since 1695, which was when the last Licensing Act had lapsed. Throughout the Romantic period therefore the Crown tried out other methods for policing reading and criminalizing certain practices of authoring and publishing. Paine was in absentia found guilty of sedition, for instance, and in 1817 the radical publisher William Hone narrowly escaped conviction for blasphemy. Another government strategy was to use taxes to inflate the prices of printed matter and so keep political information out of the hands of the poor without exactly violating the freedom of the press. In the meantime worries about how the nation would fare now that “the people” read were matched by worries about how to regulate the reading done by women. In 1807 the bowdlerized edition was born, as the Reverend Thomas Bowdler and his sister Henrietta produced *The Family Shakespeare*, concocting a Bard who, his indelicacies expurgated, could be sanctioned family fare.

Commentators who condemned the publishing industry as a scene of criminality also cited the frequency with which, during this chaotic time, best-selling books ended up republished in unauthorized, “pirated” editions. Novels were the pirates’ favorite targets. But the radical underground of London’s printing industry also appropriated one of the most politically daring works of Percy



Shelley, *Queen Mab*, and by keeping it in print, and accessible in cheap editions, thwarted attempts to posthumously sanitize the poet's reputation. And in 1817 Southey, by then a Tory and the kingdom's poet laureate, was embarrassed to find his insurrectionary drama of 1794, *Wat Tyler*, published without his permission. There was no chance, Southey learned, that the publishers who had filched his play and put this souvenir of his youthful radicalism into circulation would be punished. The court refused to grant an injunction, citing the precedent that there could be no protection for publications deemed injurious to the public.

## OTHER LITERARY FORMS

### *Prose*

Although we now know the Romantic period as an age of poetry, centered on works of imagination, nonfiction prose forms—essays, reviews, political pamphlets—flourished during the epoch, as writers seized the opportunity to speak to and for the era’s new audiences. In eighteenth-century England, prose, particularly in the urbane, accessible style that writers such as Joseph Addison and David Hume cultivated in their essays, had been valued as the medium of sociable exchange that could integrate different points of view and unify the public space known as the “republic of letters.” That ideal of civil discussion came under pressure in the Romantic period, however, since by then many intellectuals were uncertain whether a republic of letters could survive the arrival of those new readers, “the people,” and whether in this age of class awareness such a thing as a unified public culture was even possible. Those uncertainties are never far from the surface in the masterpieces of Romantic prose—a category that ranges from the pamphleteering that drew Burke, Wollstonecraft, and Paine into the Revolution controversy of the 1790s, to the periodical essays, with suggestive titles like *The Watchman* and *The Friend*, in which Coleridge turned controversialist, to the magazine writing of Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and De Quincey in the 1820s.

The issue of how the writer should relate to audience—as watchman or friend?—was especially tricky, because this period, when so many more people defined themselves as readers, saw the emergence of a new species of specialist reader. This was the critic, who, perhaps problematically, was empowered to tell all the others what to read. Following the establishment in 1802 of the *Edinburgh Review* and in 1809 of the *Quarterly Review*, a new professionalized breed of book reviewer claimed a degree of cultural authority to which eighteenth-century critics had never aspired. Whereas later-

eighteenth-century periodicals such as the *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review* had aimed to notice almost everything in print, the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* limited themselves to about fifteen books per issue. The selectivity enabled them to make decisive statements about what would count as culture and what would fall beyond the pale. They also conceptualized criticism as a space of discipline, in which the reputations of the writers under review were as likely to be marred as they were to be made. The stern Latin motto of the *Edinburgh* (founded by lawyers) translates as “the judge is condemned when the guilty go free.” The continuing tension in the relations between criticism and literature and doubt about whether critical prose can be literature—whether it can have artistic value as well as social utility—are legacies from the Romantic era. Hazlitt wondered self-consciously in an essay on criticism whether his was not in fact a critical rather than a poetical age and whether “no great works of genius appear, because so much is said and written about them.”

Hazlitt participated importantly in another development. In 1820 the founding editor of the *London Magazine* gathered a group of writers, Hazlitt, Lamb, and De Quincey, who in the *London's* pages collectively developed the Romantic form known as the familiar essay: intimate-feeling commentaries, often presented as if prompted by incidents in the authors' private lives, on an eclectic range of topics, from pork to prizefighting. In some of his essays, Hazlitt modeled an account of subjective response to works of art as most important not for how, for instance, this response prepares individuals for public citizenship, but for what it helps them discover about their personality. For their essays Lamb and De Quincey developed a style that harkened back to writers who flourished before the republic of letters and who had more idiosyncratic eccentricities than eighteenth-century decorum would have allowed. Though these essayists were very differently circumstanced from the Romantic poets who were their friends—paid by the page and writing to a deadline, for a start—their works thus parallel the poets' in also turning toward the subjective. One consequence of the essayists' cultivation of intimacy and preference for the impressionistic over the

systematic is that, when we track the history of prose to the 1820s, we see it end up in a place very different from the one it occupies at the start of the Romantic period. Participants in the Revolution controversy of the 1790s had claimed to speak for all England. By the close of the period the achievement of the familiar essay was to have brought the medium of prose within the category of “the literary”—but by distancing it from public life.

### ***Drama***

Whether the plays composed during the Romantic period can qualify as literature has been, by contrast, more of a puzzle. England throughout this period had a vibrant theatrical culture. Theater criticism, practiced with flair by Hazlitt and Lamb, emerged as a new prose genre; actors like Sarah Siddons and Edmund Kean numbered the poets among their admirers and found their way into Romantic poetry; Mary Robinson was known as an actor before she was known as an author. But there were many restrictions limiting what could be staged in England and many calls for reform. As places where crowds gathered, theaters were always closely watched by suspicious government officials. The English had habitually extolled their theater as a site of social mixing—a mirror to the political order in that it supplied all the classes in the nation (those who, depending on how their tickets were priced, frequented the box, the pit, or the gallery) with another sort of representative assembly. But during this era *disorder* seemed the rule: riots broke out at Covent Garden in 1792 and 1809. The link between drama and disorder was one reason that new dramas had to meet the approval of a censor before they could be performed, a rule in place since 1737. Another restriction was that only the theaters royal (in London, Drury Lane, and Covent Garden) had the legal right to produce “legitimate” (spoken word) drama, leaving the other stages limited to entertainments—pantomimes and melodramas mainly—in which dialogue was by regulation always combined with music. An evening’s entertainment focused on legitimate drama would not have been so different. The stages and auditoriums of the two theaters royal were huge spaces, which

encouraged their managers to favor grandiose spectacles or, more precisely, multimedia experiences, involving musicians, dancers, and artists who designed scenery, besides players and playwrights.

This theatrical culture's demotion of *words* might explain why the poets of the era, however stage-struck, found drama uncongenial. Nonetheless, almost all tried their hands at the form, tempted by the knowledge that the plays of certain of their (now less esteemed) contemporaries—Hannah Cowley and Charles Maturin, for example—had met with immense acclaim. Some of the poets' plays were composed to be read rather than performed: "closet dramas," such as Byron's *Manfred*, Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and most of Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions*, permitted experimentation with topic and form. Others were written expressly for the stage, but their authors were hampered by their inexperience and tendency, exacerbated by the censorship that encouraged them to seek safe subject matter in the past, to imitate the style of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. There were exceptions to this discouraging record. Coleridge's tragedy *Remorse*, for instance, was a minor hit and ran for twenty nights in 1813. Despite his reputation for ethereal lyrics, the most capable dramatist among the poets was, surprisingly, Percy Shelley. His powerful tragedy *The Cenci* (1820), the story of a monstrous father who rapes his daughter and is murdered by her in turn, was deemed unstageable on political rather than artistic or technical grounds. It had no chance of getting by the Examiner of Plays; indeed, by thematizing the unspeakable topic of incest, Shelley predicted his own censoring.

### ***The Novel***

Novels at the start of the Romantic period were immensely popular but—as far as critics and some of the form's half-ashamed practitioners were concerned—not quite respectable. Loose in structure, they seemed to require fewer skills than other literary genres. This genre lacked the classic pedigree claimed by poetry and drama. It attracted (or so detractors declared) an undue proportion of readers who were women, and who, by consuming its escapist

stories of romantic love, risked developing false ideas of life. It likewise attracted (so some of these same critics complained) too many *writers* who were women. (By the 1780s women were publishing as many novels as men.) Because of its popularity, the form also focused commentators' anxieties about the expansion of the book market and commercialization of literature: hence late-eighteenth-century reviewers of new novels often sarcastically described them as mass-produced commodities, not authored exactly, but instead stamped out automatically in "novel-mills." Matters changed decisively, however, starting around 1814. Reviews of Scott's *Waverley* series of historical novels and then a review that Scott wrote of Austen's *Emma* declared a renaissance—"a new style of novel." By this time, too, the genre had its historians, who delineated the novel's origins and rise and in this manner established its particularity against the more reputable literary forms. It was having a canon created for it too; figures like Barbauld and Scott compiled and introduced collections of the best novels. So equipped, the novel began to endanger poetry's long-held monopoly on literary prestige.

There had in fact been earlier signs of these new ambitions for the genre, although reviewers did not then know what to make of them. The last decade of the eighteenth century saw bold experiments with novels' form and subject matter—in particular, new ways of linking fiction with philosophy and history. Rather than, as one reviewer put it, contentedly remaining in a "region of their own," some novels showed signs of having designs on the real world. The writers now known as the Jacobin novelists used the form to test political theories and represent the political upheavals of the age. Thus in *Caleb Williams, or, Things as They Are*, William Godwin (husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, father of Mary Shelley) set out, he said, to "write a tale, that shall constitute an epoch in the mind of the reader, that no one, after he had read it, shall ever be exactly the same": the result was a chilling novel of surveillance and entrapment in which a servant recounts the persecutions he suffers at the hands of the master whose secret past he has detected. (The disturbing cat-and-mouse game between the two gets rewritten two decades

later as the conclusion to *Frankenstein*, a novel that, among many other things, represents Shelley's tribute to the philosophical fictions of her parents.) Loyalists attacked the Jacobins with their own weapons and, in making novels their ammunition, contributed in turn to enhancing the genre's cultural presence.

Another innovation in novel writing took shape, strangely enough, as a recovery of what was old. Writers whom we now describe as the Gothic novelists revisited the romance, the genre identified as the primitive forerunner of the modern novel, looking to a medieval (that is, "Gothic") Europe that they pictured as a place of gloomy castles, devious Catholic monks, and stealthy ghosts. These authors—first Walpole, followed by Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Matthew Lewis, and the hugely popular Ann Radcliffe—developed for the novel a repertory of settings and story lines meant to purvey to readers the pleasurable terror of regression to a premodern, prerational state. This Gothic turn was another instance of the period's "romance revival," another variation on the effort to renew the literature of the present by reworking the past. Gothic fiction was thus promoted in terms running parallel to those in accounts of the powers of poetry: when novels break with humdrum reality, Barbauld explained, "our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers."

Possibly this "new world" was meant to supply Romantic-period readers with an escape route from the present and from what Godwin called "things as they are." Certainly, the pasts that Gothic novelists conjure up are conceived of in fanciful, freewheeling ways; it is comical just how often a Radcliffe heroine who is supposed to inhabit sixteenth-century France can act like a proper English girl on the marriage market in the 1790s. But even that example of anachronism might suggest that some Gothic novelists were inviting readers to assess their stories as engaging the questions of the day. Gothic horrors gave many writers a language in which to examine the nature of power—the elements of sadism and masochism in the relations between men and women, for instance. And frequently the Gothic novelists probe the very ideas of historical accuracy and

legitimacy that critics use against them, and meditate on who is authorized to tell the story of the past and who is not.



**The Novel.** Illustration by James Northcote of a scene in William Hayley's didactic poem *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781): the heroine's maiden aunt has just caught her in possession of a novel and seized the book as "filthy trash"—while secretly intending to keep it for herself.

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The ascendancy of the novel in the early nineteenth century is in many ways a function of fiction writers' new self-consciousness about their relation to works of history. By 1814 the novelist and historian



encroached on each other's territory more than ever. This was not exactly because nineteenth-century novelists were renewing their commitment to probability and realism (although, defining themselves against the critically reviled Gothic novelists, many were) but rather because the nature of things historical was also being reinvented. In light of the French Revolution, history's traditional emphasis on public affairs and great men had begun to give way to an emphasis on beliefs, customs, everyday habits—the approach we now identify with social history. Novelists pursued similar interests: in works like *Castle Rackrent*, Maria Edgeworth, for instance, provides an almost anthropological account of the way of life of a bygone Ireland. The only novelist before Scott whom the influential *Edinburgh Review* took seriously, Edgeworth builds into her “national tales” details about local practices that demonstrate how people's ways of seeing are rooted in the particularities of their native places. Scott learned from her, incorporating her regionalism into his new style of historical novels, in which, with deeply moving results, he also portrayed the past as a place of adventure, pageantry, and grandeur.

Scott and Edgeworth establish the master theme of the early-nineteenth-century novel: the question of how the individual consciousness intermeshes with larger social structures, of how far character is the product of history and how far it is not. Jane Austen's brilliance as a satirist of the English leisure class often prompts literary historians to compare her works to witty Restoration and eighteenth-century comedies. But she too helped bring this theme to the forefront of novel writing, devising new ways of articulating the relationship between the psychological history of the individual and the history of society and, with unsurpassed psychological insight, creating unforgettable heroines who live in time and change. As with other Romantics, Austen's topic is revolution—revolutions of the mind. The momentous event in her fictions, which resemble Wordsworth's poetry in finding out the extraordinary in the everyday, is the change of mind that creates the possibility of love. Contrasting his own “big bow-wow strain” with Austen's nuance, Scott wrote that Austen “had a talent for describing

the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with." Nineteenth-century reviewers of his triumphant *Waverley* series were certain that Scott's example foretold the future of novel writing. He, however, recognized the extent to which Austen had also changed the genre in which she worked, by developing a new novelistic language for the workings of the mind in flux.

# The Romantic Period

TEXTS	CONTEXTS	
<b>1773</b> Anna Letitia Aikin (later Barbauld), <i>Poems</i>	<b>1773</b> East India Act brings large portions of the Indian subcontinent under British government control	
<b>1774</b> J. W. von Goethe, <i>The Sorrows of Young Werther</i>		
	<b>1775</b> American War of Independence (1775–83)	
<b>1776</b> Adam Smith, <i>The Wealth of Nations</i>		
<b>1778</b> Frances Burney, <i>Evelina</i>		
<b>1779</b> Samuel Johnson, <i>Lives of the English Poets</i> (1779–81)		
	<b>1780</b> Gordon Riots in London	

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
<b>1781</b> Immanuel Kant, <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> . Jean-Jacques Rousseau, <i>Confessions</i> . J. C. Friedrich Schiller, <i>The Robbers</i>	
	<b>1783</b> William Pitt becomes prime minister (serving until 1801 and again in 1804–06)
<b>1784</b> Charlotte Smith, <i>Elegiac Sonnets</i>	<b>1784</b> Death of Samuel Johnson. Warren Hastings and Sir William Jones found the Asiatic Society in Calcutta
<b>1785</b> William Cowper, <i>The Task</i>	
<b>1786</b> William Beckford, <i>Vathek</i> . Robert Burns, <i>Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect</i>	
	<b>1787</b> W. A. Mozart, <i>Don Giovanni</i> . Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade founded

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
<b>1789</b> Jeremy Bentham, <i>Principles of Morals and Legislation</i> . William Blake, <i>Songs of Innocence</i>	<b>1789</b> Fall of the Bastille (beginning of the French Revolution)
<b>1790</b> Joanna Baillie, <i>Poems</i> . Blake, <i>The Marriage of Heaven and Hell</i> . Edmund Burke, <i>Reflections on the Revolution in France</i>	<b>1790</b> J. M. W. Turner first exhibits at the Royal Academy
<b>1791</b> William Gilpin, <i>Observations on the River Wye</i> . Thomas Paine, <i>Rights of Man</i> . Ann Radcliffe, <i>The Romance of the Forest</i>	<b>1791</b> Revolution in St.-Domingue (modern Haiti)
<b>1792</b> Mary Wollstonecraft, <i>A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i>	<b>1792</b> September Massacres in Paris. First gas lights in Britain
<b>1793</b> William Godwin, <i>Political Justice</i>	<b>1793</b> Execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. France declares war against Britain (and then Britain against France). The Reign of Terror

TEXTS	CONTEXTS	
<b>1794</b> Blake, <i>Songs of Experience</i> . Godwin, <i>Caleb Williams</i> . Radcliffe, <i>The Mysteries of Udolpho</i>	<b>1794</b> The fall of Robespierre. Trials for high treason of members of the London Corresponding Society	
	<b>1795</b> Pitt's Gagging Acts suppress freedom of speech and assembly in Britain	
<b>1796</b> Matthew Gregory Lewis, <i>The Monk</i>		
	<b>1797</b> Mary Wollstonecraft dies from complications of childbirth	
<b>1798</b> Baillie, <i>Plays on the Passions</i> , vol. 1. Bentham, <i>Political Economy</i> . Thomas Malthus, <i>An Essay on the Principle of Population</i> . William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, <i>Lyrical Ballads</i>	<b>1798</b> Rebellion in Ireland	
<b>1800</b> Maria Edgeworth, <i>Castle Rackrent</i> . Mary Robinson, <i>Lyrical Tales</i>		

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
	<b>1801</b> Parliamentary Union of Ireland and Great Britain
<b>1802–03</b> Walter Scott, <i>Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border</i>	<b>1802</b> Treaty of Amiens. <i>Edinburgh Review</i> founded. John Constable first exhibits at the Royal Academy
	<b>1804</b> Napoleon crowned emperor. Founding of the republic of Haiti
<b>1805</b> Scott, <i>The Lay of the Last Minstrel</i>	<b>1805</b> The French fleet defeated by the British at Trafalgar
<b>1807</b> Wordsworth, <i>Poems in Two Volumes</i> . Charlotte Smith, <i>Beachy Head</i>	<b>1807</b> Abolition of the slave trade
<b>1808</b> Goethe, <i>Faust</i> , part I	<b>1808</b> Ludwig van Beethoven, Symphonies 5 and 6
	<b>1809</b> <i>Quarterly Review</i> founded

TEXTS	CONTEXTS
<b>1811</b> Jane Austen, <i>Sense and Sensibility</i>	<b>1811</b> The Prince of Wales becomes regent for George III, who is declared incurably insane
<b>1812</b> Byron, <i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i> , cantos 1 and 2. Felicia Hemans, <i>The Domestic Affections</i> . Barbauld, <i>Eighteen Hundred and Eleven</i>	<b>1812</b> War between Britain and the United States (1812–15)
<b>1813</b> Austen, <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> . Byron, <i>The Giaour</i>	<b>1813</b> Renewal of charter of East India Company, with "pious clause," authorizing missionary activity on the Indian subcontinent
<b>1814</b> Scott, <i>Waverley</i> . Wordsworth, <i>The Excursion</i>	
	<b>1815</b> Napoleon defeated at Waterloo. Corn Laws passed, protecting economic interests of the landed aristocracy
<b>1816</b> Byron, <i>Childe Harold</i> , cantos 3 and 4. Coleridge,	



TEXTS	CONTEXTS
<i>Christabel</i> , "Kubla Khan." Percy Shelley, <i>Alastor</i>	
<b>1817</b> Byron, <i>Manfred</i> . Coleridge, <i>Biographia Literaria</i> and <i>Sibylline Leaves</i> . John Keats, <i>Poems</i>	<b>1817</b> <i>Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine</i> founded. Death of Princess Charlotte. Death of Jane Austen
<b>1818</b> Austen, <i>Persuasion</i> and <i>Northanger Abbey</i> . Keats, <i>Endymion</i> . Thomas Love Peacock, <i>Nightmare Abbey</i> . Mary Shelley, <i>Frankenstein</i>	
<b>1819</b> Byron, <i>Don Juan</i> , cantos I and II. Percy Shelley, <i>The Mask of Anarchy</i>	<b>1819</b> "Peterloo Massacre" in Manchester
<b>1820</b> John Clare, <i>Poems Descriptive of Rural Life</i> . Keats, <i>Lamia</i> , <i>Isabella</i> , <i>The Eve of St. Agnes</i> , and <i>Other Poems</i> . Percy Shelley, <i>Prometheus Unbound</i>	<b>1820</b> Death of George III; accession of George IV. <i>London Magazine</i> founded
<b>1821</b> Thomas De Quincey, <i>Confessions of an English Opium-Eater</i> . Percy Shelley,	<b>1821</b> Deaths of Keats in Rome and Napoleon at St. Helena

TEXTS	CONTEXTS	
<i>Adonais</i> . Clare, <i>The Village Minstrel</i>		
	<b>1822</b> Franz Schubert, Unfinished Symphony. Death of Percy Shelley in the Bay of Spezia, near Lerici, Italy	
<b>1823</b> Charles Lamb, <i>Essays of Elia</i>		
<b>1824</b> Letitia Landon, <i>The Improvisatrice</i>	<b>1824</b> Death of Byron in Missolonghi	
<b>1825</b> William Hazlitt, <i>The Spirit of the Age</i>		
<b>1826</b> Mary Shelley, <i>The Last Man</i>		
<b>1827</b> Clare, <i>The Shepherd's Calendar</i>		
<b>1827</b> Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, <i>Poems</i>		

TEXTS	CONTEXTS	
<b>1828</b> Hemans, <i>Records of Woman</i>	<b>1828</b> Parliamentary repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts excluding Dissenters from state offices	
	<b>1829</b> Catholic Emancipation	
<b>1830</b> Charles Lyell, <i>Principles of Geology</i> (1830–33). Alfred Tennyson, <i>Poems, Chiefly Lyrical</i>	<b>1830</b> Death of George IV; accession of William IV. Revolution in France	
	<b>1832</b> First Reform Bill	
<b>1835</b> Clare, <i>The Rural Muse</i>		

# Balladry and Ballad Revivals

Through the eighteenth century many commentators (Joseph Addison in his *Spectator* essays of 1711 most famously) proposed that polished modern poetry might not hold its own when compared to “darling songs of the common people” such as “The Children in the Wood” or “Chevy Chase.” By the end of the century authors and scholars not only haunted the city streets where Addison had encountered itinerant ballad singers hawking the crudely printed broadsides that contained those songs, hunting for the “majestic simplicity” that Addison had celebrated, they also headed to remote, undeveloped parts of Britain and to the border regions between the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands and between Scotland and England especially. They made a systematic effort to write down and then put into print the words to the tunes and chants they heard there. These were the stages by which literary culture began to engage, sometimes squeamishly, with an oral culture associated with sensational stories (of infanticide, bloody feuds, supernatural events, illicit sex) and with illiterate and barely literate people—the unnamed shepherds and old servant women, for instance, who served as the sources for Sir Walter Scott’s ballad collection *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–03).

Through popular ballads, these collectors sought an alternative to the refinement and elegance that were supposed to regulate eighteenth-century literary culture. In the people who remembered and performed them, they hoped to encounter living relics of a lost past, closer to nature than modern times: a hope that made Romantic-period ballad scholarship a dry run for the discipline of folklore that would come onto the scene at the nineteenth century’s end. It was “in the first ages of society,” the professor of Rhetoric at Edinburgh University Hugh Blair declared in 1765, that poetry was “most glowing and animated.” Ballad revivals seemed a way to

recover the primal energies that poetry was thought to have lost as a consequence of Enlightenment, the standardization of the English language, and the triumph of good taste.

Ballads are tricky to locate historically. This is because these narrative poems have a complicated relationship to authorship. Those who sing or recite them invariably change, even recompose, them, and, accordingly, when one speaks of “Sir Patrick Spens,” one is actually speaking of a number of poems telling the same story in different words. In different localities, different versions will prevail. Early editions of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* presented ballads as belonging to medieval literature. This presentation registered the impact of theories, like the one that Thomas Percy elaborated as the compiler of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), that proposed that the songs sung by eighteenth-century balladeers actually represented the corrupted remnants of a romantic literature of the Middle Ages. Ballads, Percy and his followers insisted, were originally the works of court minstrels who enjoyed a social centrality denied to modern poets; balladry decisively predated the commercial networks established with the advent of print technology. Scholars nowadays place the origin of much of the ballad canon later, from the seventeenth century on, and they believe print has played a larger part in the transmission of oral culture across time than eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collectors were willing to accept.

Arranging for ballads to head up the Romantic period, as this edition does, is a way to acknowledge how generative balladry was for Romantic poetics. It fueled the interest that many Romantic poets took in the sound effects that might reconnect printed poetry to the living voice. It prompted the sort of experimentation with genres that Wordsworth and Coleridge signaled with their title *Lyrical Ballads*. It also fueled the primitivism of the period: authors’ and readers’ nostalgia for a lost world shaped by the immediate contact between singers and their auditors, and not by the mediation of an impersonal market in printed books.

Their basis in song lends ballads their distinctive features: their regular meter and use of refrain and repetition; their characteristic stanzaic form (“ballad stanzas” are quatrains of alternating four-beat and three-beat lines, with a rhyme scheme abcb). As Addison recognized, the stark simplicity of the ballads helps them take hold of their audience’s imaginations. They haunt us—and continue to be performed by modern musicians—not just because of their tunes but also because these pared-down narratives enigmatically refuse to elaborate on the dramatic incidents at their centers.

Though the spelling has been modernized, the texts we give here as examples of ballads are based on those provided in books that Romantic authors would have read. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Francis James Child synthesized the work of previous ballad scholars in his comprehensive and still-standard collection *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1888–92); the numbers under which Child lists these ballads are provided in the notes.

# Lord Randall<sup>1</sup>

"O where ha'e ye been, Lord Randall my son?  
O where ha'e ye been, my handsome young man?"

"I ha'e been to the wild wood: mother, make my  
bed soon,  
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain o wald o lie  
down."

5 "Where gat ye your dinner, Lord Randall my son?  
Where gat ye your dinner, my handsome young  
man?"

"I dined wi' my true love: mother, make my bed  
soon,  
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

10 "What gat ye to your dinner, Lord Randall my son?  
What gat ye to your dinner, my handsome young  
man?"

"I gat eels boiled in broo: o mother, make my bed  
soon,  
For I'm weary wi' hunting and fain wald lie down."

"What became of your bloodhounds, Lord Randall  
my son?

What became of your bloodhounds, my handsome  
young man?"

15 "O they swelled and they died: mother, make my  
bed soon,

For I'm weary wi' hunting and fain wald lie down."

"O I fear ye are poisoned, Lord Randall my son!

O I fear ye are poisoned, my handsome young man!"

“Oh yes, I am poisoned: mother, make my bed  
soon,  
For I’m sick at the heart, and I fain wald lie down.”

20

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Child, no. 12D. From Scott’s *Minstrelsy* (1803).[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *gladly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *would* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *broth* [Return to reference °](#)



# Bonny Barbara Allan<sup>1</sup>

It was in and about the Martinmas<sup>o</sup> time,  
When the green leaves were a-fallin';  
That Sir John Graeme in the West Country  
Fell in love with Barbara Allan.

5 He sent his man down through the town  
To the place where she was dwellin':  
"O haste and come to my master dear,  
Gin<sup>o</sup> ye be Barbara Allan."

10 O hooly,<sup>o</sup> hooly rase<sup>o</sup> she up,  
To the place where he was lyin',  
And when she drew the curtain by:  
"Young man, I think you're dyin'."

"O it's I'm sick, and very, very sick,  
And 'tis a' for Barbara Allan."  
15 "O the better for me ye sal<sup>o</sup> never be,  
Though your heart's blood were a-spillin'.

"O dinna ye mind,<sup>2</sup> young man," said she,  
"When ye the cups were fillin',  
That ye made the healths gae<sup>o</sup> round and round,  
20 And slighted Barbara Allan?"

He turned his face unto the wall,  
And death with him was dealin':  
"Adieu, adieu, my dear friends all,  
And be kind to Barbara Allan."

And slowly, slowly, rase she up,

And slowly, slowly left him;  
 25 And sighing said she could not stay,  
 Since death of life had reft<sup>o</sup> him.  
  
 She had not gane<sup>o</sup> a mile but twa,<sup>o</sup>  
 30 When she heard the dead-bell knellin',  
 And every jow<sup>o</sup> that the dead-bell ga'ed<sup>o</sup>  
 It cried, "Woe to Barbara Allan!"  
  
 "O mother, mother, make my bed,  
 O make it soft and narrow:  
 35 Since my love died for me today,  
 I'll die for him tomorrow."

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Child, no. 84A. From Allan Ramsay's *The Tea-Table Miscellany; or ... choice songs, Scots and English* (10th ed., 1740). In 1666 the diarist Samuel Pepys, whose collection of broadside ballads is preserved at Magdalene College, Cambridge University, reported the "perfect pleasure" with which he heard an actress sing "her little Scotch song of Barbary Allen."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Don't you remember.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *November 11*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *if*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gently* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rose*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *shall*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *go*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *deprived*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gone* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *two* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stroke* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made* [Return to reference](#) °

# The Wife of Usher's Well<sup>1</sup>

There lived a wife at Usher's Well,  
And a wealthy wife was she;  
She had three stout and stalwart sons,  
And sent them o'er the sea.

5 They hadna' been a week from her,  
A week but barely ane,<sup>o</sup>  
When word came to the carlin<sup>o</sup> wife  
That her three sons were gane.<sup>o</sup>

10 They hadna' been a week from her,  
A week but barely three,  
When word came to the carlin wife  
That her sons she'd never see.

"I wish the wind may never cease  
Nor fashes<sup>o</sup> in the flood,  
15 Till my three sons come hame<sup>o</sup> to me,  
In earthly flesh and blood."

It fell about the Martinmas,<sup>o</sup>  
When nights are long and mirk,<sup>o</sup>  
The carlin wife's three sons came hame,  
20 And their hats were o' the birk.<sup>2</sup>

It neither grew in sike<sup>o</sup> nor ditch,  
Nor yet in ony sheugh,<sup>o</sup>  
But at the gates o' Paradise  
That birk grew fair eneugh.

"Blow up the fire, my maidens,

25           Bring water from the well:  
For a' my house shall feast this night,  
          Since my three sons are well."

          And she has made to them a bed,  
          She's made it large and wide,  
30       And she's ta'en her mantle her about,  
          Sat down at the bedside.

          Up then crew the red, red cock,  
          And up and crew the gray.  
35       The eldest to the youngest said,  
          "'Tis time we were away."<sup>3</sup>

          The cock he hadna' crawled but once,  
          And clapped his wings at a',  
          When the youngest to the eldest said,  
40       "Brother, we must awa'."<sup>o</sup>

          "The cock doth crawl, the day doth daw,<sup>o</sup>  
          The channerin'<sup>o</sup> worm doth chide:  
          Gin<sup>o</sup> we be missed out o' our place,  
          A sair pain we maun bide."<sup>4</sup>

45       "Fare ye weel,<sup>o</sup> my mother dear,  
          Fareweel to barn and byre."<sup>o</sup>  
          And fare ye weel, the bonny lass  
          That kindles my mother's fire."

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Child, no. 79A. From Scott's *Minstrelsy* (1802), which bases its text "on the recitation of an old woman" living in West Lothian, a rural district to the west of Edinburgh.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Birch. Those returning from the dead were thought to wear vegetation on their heads.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The dead must return to their graves at cock-crow.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A sore pain we must abide.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *old*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gone*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *disturbances*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *home*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *November 11*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dark*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *field*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *furrow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *away*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dawn*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fretting*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *if*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *well*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cow house*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Three Ravens<sup>1</sup>

There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
*Down a down, hay down, hay down*  
There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
*With a down*

5 There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
They were as black as they might be,  
*With a down, derry, derry, derry, down, down.*<sup>2</sup>

The one of them said to his mate,  
"Where shall we our breakfast take?"

10 "Down in yonder green field  
There lies a knight slain under his shield.

"His hounds they lie down at his feet,  
So well they can their master keep.

15 "His hawks they fly so eagerly,<sup>o</sup>  
There's no fowl<sup>o</sup> dare him come nigh."

Down there comes a fallow<sup>o</sup> doe,  
As great with young as she might go.<sup>o</sup>

She lifted up his bloody head,  
And kissed his wounds that were so red.

20 She got him up upon her back,  
And carried him to earthen lake.<sup>o</sup>

She buried him before the prime;<sup>3</sup>  
She was dead herself ere evensong time.

God send every gentleman  
Such hawks, such hounds, and such a lemman.°

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Child, no. 26A. The text is that of the first version to appear in print, in Thomas Ravenscroft's songbook *Melismata* (1611), reprinted in Joseph Ritson's *Ancient Songs* (1790).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The following stanzas take the same pattern with the repetition of the first line and the refrains.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The first hour of the morning.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *fiercely*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bird*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *red-brown*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *walk*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pit*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mistress*[Return to reference °](#)



# Sir Patrick Spens<sup>1</sup>

The king sits in Dumferline town,  
Drinking the blude-reid<sup>o</sup> wine:  
"O whar will I get a guid sailor  
To sail this ship of mine?"

5 Up and spak an eldern<sup>o</sup> knicht,  
Sat at the king's richt knee:  
"Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor  
That sails upon the sea."

10 The king has written a braid<sup>o</sup> letter  
And signed it wi' his hand,  
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,  
Was walking on the sand.

15 The first line that Sir Patrick read,  
A loud lauch<sup>o</sup> lauched he;  
The next line that Sir Patrick read,  
The tear blinded his ee.<sup>o</sup>

"O wha<sup>o</sup> is this has done this deed,  
This ill deed done to me,  
To send me out this time o' the year,  
To sail upon the sea?"

20 "Make haste, make haste, my mirry men all,  
Our guid ship sails the morn."  
"O say na<sup>o</sup> sae,<sup>o</sup> my master dear,  
For I fear a deadly storm.

"Late late yestre'en I saw the new moon  
Wi' the auld<sup>o</sup> moon in her arm,

25 And I fear, I fear, my dear master,  
That we will come to harm."

30 O our Scots nobles were richt laith<sup>o</sup>  
To weet<sup>o</sup> their cork-heeled shoon,<sup>o</sup>  
But lang owre<sup>o</sup> a' the play were played  
Their hats they swam aboon.<sup>o</sup>

35 O lang, lang may their ladies sit,  
Wi' their fans into their hand,  
Or e'er they see Sir Patrick Spens  
Come sailing to the land.

40 O lang, lang may the ladies stand,  
Wi' their gold kembs<sup>o</sup> in their hair,  
Waiting for their ain<sup>o</sup> dear lords,  
For they'll see thame na mair.<sup>o</sup>

Half o'er,<sup>o</sup> half o'er to Aberdour  
It's fifty fadom<sup>o</sup> deep,  
And there lies guid Sir Patrick Spens,  
Wi' the Scots lords at his feet.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Child, no. 58A. From Percy's *Reliques* (1765), where Percy declares himself sure that the ballad has a basis in history but fails to pinpoint just when "this fatal expedition happened that proved so destructive to the Scottish nobles." The version in Scott's *Minstrelsy* (1803) includes a stanza that describes Sir Patrick Spens's ship as bound for Norway, where Spens is to collect the daughter of the Norwegian king. [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *bloodred*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ancient*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *laugh*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eye*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *who*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *not* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *so*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *old*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *loath*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wet* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shoes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ere*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *above*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *combs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *own*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *more*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *halfway over*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fathoms*[Return to reference](#) °

# The Dæmon-lover<sup>1</sup>

"O where have you been, my long, long love,  
This long seven years and mair?"

"O I'm come to seek my former vows,  
Ye granted me before."

5 "O hold your tongue of your former vows,  
For they will breed sad strife;  
O hold your tongue of your former vows,  
For I am become a wife."

He turned him right and round about,  
And the tear blinded his e'e;<sup>o</sup>  
10 "I wad never hae trodden on Irish ground,  
If it had not been for thee."

"I might hae had a king's daughter,  
Far, far beyond the sea;  
I might have had a king's daughter,  
15 Had it not been for love o' thee."

"If ye might have had a king's daughter,  
Yer sel ye had to blame;  
Ye might have taken the king's daughter,  
For ye kend<sup>o</sup> that I was nane."  
20

"O faulse are the vows of womankind,  
But fair is their faulse bodie;  
I never wad hae trodden on Irish ground,  
Had it not been for love o' thee."

"If I was to leave my husband dear,  
And my two babes also,

25 O what have you to take me to,  
If with you I should go?"

"I hae seven ships upon the sea,  
The eighth brought me to land;  
30 With four-and-twenty bold mariners,  
And music on every hand."

She has taken up her two little babes,  
Kissed them baith cheek and chin;  
35 "O fair ye weel, my ain two babes,  
For I'll never see you again."

She set her foot upon the ship,  
No mariners could she behold;  
But the sails were o' the taffetie,  
40 And the masts o' the beaten gold.

She had not sailed a league, a league,  
A league but barely three,  
When dismal grew his countenance,  
And drumlie<sup>o</sup> grew his e'e.

45 The masts, that were like the beaten gold,  
Bent not on the heaving seas;  
But the sails, that were o' the taffetie,  
Fill'd not in the east land breeze.

They had not sail'd a league, a league,  
A league but barely three,  
50 Until she espied his cloven foot,  
And she wept right bitterlie.

"O hold your tongue of your weeping," says he,  
"Of your weeping now let me be;  
I will shew you how the lilies grow  
On the banks of Italy."

55      "O what hills are yon, yon pleasant hills,  
             That the sun shines sweetly on?"  
             "O yon are the hills of heaven," he said,  
             "Where you will never win."  
 60  
             "O whaten a mountain is yon," she said,  
             "All so dreary wi' frost and snow?"  
             "O yon is the mountain of hell," he cried,  
             "Where you and I will go."  
  
 65      And aye when she turn'd her round about,  
             Aye taller he seem'd for to be;  
             Until that the tops o' that gallant ship  
             Nae taller were than he.  
  
             The clouds grew dark, and the wind grew loud,  
             And the levin<sup>o</sup> fill'd her e'e;  
 70      And waesome wail'd the snaw-white sprites  
             Upon the gurlie<sup>o</sup> sea.  
  
             He struck the tap-mast wi' his hand,  
             The fore-mast wi' his knee;  
             And he brake that gallant ship in twain,  
 75      And sank her in the sea.

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
 Child, no. 243F. From Scott's *Minstrelsy* (5th ed., 1812), a ballad contributed by Scott's friend William Laidlaw, who took it down from the recitation of one Walter Grieve and also "improved" it with four stanzas (6, 12, 17, 18) of his own authoring: the authenticity that balladry promised was sometimes an object of fabrication. In the United States, this ballad has been handed

down with the title "The House Carpenter," the trade of the husband whom the woman leaves behind.

[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *eye*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *knew*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *troubled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lightning*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stormy*[Return to reference °](#)

# **ANNA LETITIA BARBAULD**

## **1743–1825**

Anna Barbauld, born Anna Letitia Aikin, received an unusual education from her father, who was a minister and a teacher at the Warrington Academy in Lancashire, the great educational center for the Nonconformist community, whose religion barred them from admission to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. During the eighteenth century Dissenting academies such as Warrington had developed a modern curriculum in the natural sciences as well as in modern languages and English literature. This progressive educational program deviated significantly from the curriculum, scarcely altered since the sixteenth century, that was supplied by the old universities. The benefits Barbauld received from her exposure to an educational system that the Dissenters had designed with their sons in mind are suggested by the astounding versatility of her literary career.

She made her literary debut in 1773 with *Poems* and *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, the latter co-written with her brother John. The books immediately established her as a leading author. Her marriage the next year to Rochemont Barbauld, a Dissenting minister like her father, and their decision to set up a boys' school together therefore struck the critic Samuel Johnson as squandering this woman's own unusual education: "Miss [Aikin] was an instance of early cultivation, but in what did it terminate?" Thereafter, until Rochemont Barbauld's increasing mental instability necessitated the



closing of their school, Barbauld divided her time between writing and teaching the younger boys. Because of the popularity of Barbauld's *Lessons for Children* (1778–79) and *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), William Hazlitt was recording a common experience when he recalled that he read her books “before those of any other author . . . , when I was learning to spell words of one syllable.” This writing for child audiences registered Barbauld's Enlightenment faith in human potential.

Her fame continued to grow in the 1790s, and in 1797 the up-and-coming poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge walked forty miles to meet her. During this decade Barbauld contributed poetry to her brother John's *Monthly Magazine*, published her “Epistle to William Wilberforce” attacking British involvement in the slave trade, and wrote pamphlets that opposed the war with France and campaigned for the repeal of the Test Acts that had barred participation in the public life of the nation to Nonconformists (those men who would not subscribe, as “tests” of their loyalty, to the thirty-nine Articles of the Established Church). She accompanied this writing with editing, producing editions of William Collins's poems (1797) and the novelist Samuel Richardson's letters (1804). Her fifty-volume compilation *The British Novelists* (1810) was the first attempt to establish a national canon in fiction and thereby do for the novel what Samuel Johnson's *Works of the English Poets* (1779–81) had done for poetry. Its introductory essay, “On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing,” makes a pioneering argument for the educational and artistic value of the still disreputable genre.

Barbauld's last major work was *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), a long poem that despairs over the war with France (then in its seventeenth year) and the corruption of English consumer society. (An excerpt may be found in “Romantic Literature and Wartime,” on [p. 755](#) of this volume.) Critics were unnerved, even disgusted, by the poem's apocalyptic vision of a future in which England, its pride humbled, would lie in ruins—the more so because of its author's gender. The Tory critic John Wilson Croker thus warned Barbauld “to desist from satire”: it was not up to a “lady-

author" to sally forth from her knitting and say how "the empire might . . . be saved." Despite this abuse, Barbauld did not stop writing. She continued, as had long been her practice, to circulate work in manuscript and published a few poems in magazines. The posthumous collection of Barbauld's *Works* that her niece Lucy Aikin brought out in 1825 contained several previously unpublished pieces.

## A Summer Evening's Meditation<sup>1</sup>

'Tis past! The sultry tyrant of the south  
Has spent his short-lived rage; more grateful<sup>o</sup> hours  
Move silent on; the skies no more repel  
The dazzled sight, but with mild maiden beams  
Of tempered lustre court the cherished eye  
5 To wander o'er their sphere; where, hung aloft,  
Dian's bright crescent, like a silver bow  
New strung in heaven, lifts high its beamy horns  
Impatient for the night, and seems to push  
Her brother<sup>o</sup> down the sky. Fair Venus shines  
10 Even in the eye of day; with sweetest beam  
Propitious shines, and shakes a trembling flood  
Of softened radiance from her dewy locks.  
The shadows spread apace; while meekened<sup>2</sup> Eve,  
Her cheek yet warm with blushes, slow retires  
15 Through the Hesperian gardens of the west,  
And shuts the gates of day. 'Tis now the hour  
When Contemplation from her sunless haunts,  
The cool damp grotto, or the lonely depth  
Of unpierced woods, where wrapt in solid shade  
20 She mused away the gaudy hours of noon,  
And fed on thoughts unripened by the sun,  
Moves forward; and with radiant finger points  
To yon blue concave swelled by breath divine,  
Where, one by one, the living eyes of heaven  
25 Awake, quick kindling o'er the face of ether  
One boundless blaze; ten thousand trembling fires,  
And dancing lustres, where the unsteady eye,  
Restless and dazzled, wanders unconfined  
O'er all this field of glories; spacious field,

30 And worthy of the Master: he, whose hand  
With hieroglyphics elder than the Nile  
Inscribed the mystic tablet, hung on high  
To public gaze, and said, "Adore, O man!  
35 The finger of thy God." From what pure wells  
Of milky light, what soft o'erflowing urn,  
Are all these lamps so fill'd? these friendly lamps,  
For ever streaming o'er the azure deep  
To point our path, and light us to our home.  
How soft they slide along their lucid spheres!  
40 And silent as the foot of Time, fulfill  
Their destined courses: Nature's self is hushed,  
And, but<sup>o</sup> a scattered leaf, which rustles through  
The thick-wove foliage, not a sound is heard  
To break the midnight air; though the raised ear,  
45 Intensely listening, drinks in every breath.  
How deep the silence, yet how loud the praise!  
But are they silent all? or is there not  
A tongue in every star, that talks with man,  
And woos him to be wise? nor woos in vain:  
50 This dead of midnight is the noon of thought,  
And Wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars.  
At this still hour the self-collected soul  
Turns inward, and beholds a stranger there  
Of high descent, and more than mortal rank;  
55 An embryo God; a spark of fire divine,  
Which must burn on for ages, when the sun,—  
Fair transitory creature of a day!—  
Has closed his golden eye, and wrapt in shades  
Forgets his wonted journey through the east.

60 Ye citadels of light, and seats of Gods!  
Perhaps my future home, from whence the soul,  
Revolving<sup>o</sup> periods past, may oft look back  
With recollected tenderness on all  
The various busy scenes she left below,

65 Its deep-laid projects and its strange events,  
As on some fond and doting tale that soothed  
Her infant hours—O be it lawful now  
To tread the hallowed circle of your courts,  
And with mute wonder and delighted awe  
70 Approach your burning confines. Seized in thought,  
On Fancy's wild and roving wing I sail,  
From the green borders of the peopled Earth,  
And the pale Moon, her duteous fair attendant;  
From solitary Mars; from the vast orb  
75 Of Jupiter, whose huge gigantic bulk  
Dances in ether like the lightest leaf;  
To the dim verge, the suburbs of the system,  
Where cheerless Saturn<sup>3</sup> 'midst his watery moons  
Girt with a lucid zone,<sup>o</sup> in gloomy pomp,  
80 Sits like an exiled monarch: fearless thence  
I launch into the trackless deeps of space,  
Where, burning round, ten thousand suns appear,  
Of elder beam, which ask no leave to shine  
Of our terrestrial star, nor borrow light  
85 From the proud regent of our scanty day;  
Sons of the morning, first-born of creation,  
And only less than Him who marks their track,  
And guides their fiery wheels. Here must I stop,  
Or is there aught beyond? What hand unseen  
90 Impels me onward through the glowing orbs  
Of habitable nature, far remote,  
To the dread confines of eternal night,  
To solitudes of vast unpeopled space,  
The deserts of creation, wide and wild;  
95 Where embryo systems and unkindled suns  
Sleep in the womb of chaos? fancy droops,  
And thought astonished stops her bold career.  
But O thou mighty mind! whose powerful word  
Said, thus let all things be, and thus they were,<sup>4</sup>

100 Where shall I seek thy presence? how unblamed  
Invoke thy dread perfection?  
Have the broad eyelids of the morn beheld thee?  
Or does the beamy shoulder of Orion  
105 Support thy throne? O look with pity down  
On erring, guilty man! not in thy names  
Of terror clad; not with those thunders armed  
That conscious Sinai felt, when fear appalled  
The scattered tribes;<sup>5</sup>—thou hast a gentler voice,  
110 That whispers comfort to the swelling heart,  
Abashed, yet longing to behold her Maker.

But now my soul, unused to stretch her powers  
In flight so daring, drops her weary wing,  
And seeks again the known accustomed spot,  
115 Drest up with sun, and shade, and lawns, and  
streams,  
A mansion fair, and spacious for its guest,  
And full replete with wonders. Let me here,  
Content and grateful, wait the appointed time,  
And ripen for the skies: the hour will come  
120 When all these splendours bursting on my sight  
Shall stand unveiled, and to my ravished sense  
Unlock the glories of the world unknown.

1773

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
This poem looks backward to poems such as William Collins's "Ode to Evening" (1748), Anne Finch's "A Nocturnal Reverie" (1713), and even to Milton's description in book 2 of *Paradise Lost* of Satan's daring navigation of the realm of Chaos. At the same time Barbauld's excursion-and-return structure anticipates the high flights (and returns) of later lyrics by Coleridge, Percy

Shelley, and Keats. But her account of the journey, with its references to Diana's crescent (line 7) and Venus's sweetest beams (10 and 11) is *differently* gendered: this soul that launches "into the trackless deeps" (82) is clearly female.

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Softened, made meek. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Saturn marked the outmost bounds of the solar system until the discovery of Uranus in 1781. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An echo of Genesis 1:3. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: When God came down to deliver the Ten Commandments "there were thunders and lightnings . . . so that all the people . . . trembled" (Exodus 19:16). [Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *pleasing* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Apollo* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *except for* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *meditating on* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *belt* [Return to reference °](#)

# Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq., on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade<sup>1</sup>

Cease, Wilberforce, to urge thy generous aim!  
Thy Country knows the sin, and stands the shame!  
The Preacher, Poet, Senator in vain  
Has rattled in her sight the Negro's chain;  
5 With his deep groans assail'd her startled ear,  
And rent the veil that hid his constant tear;  
Forc'd her averted eyes his stripes to scan,  
Beneath the bloody scourge laid bare the man,  
Claim'd Pity's tear, urg'd Conscience' strong control,  
10 And flash'd conviction on her shrinking soul.  
The Muse too, soon awak'd, with ready tongue  
At Mercy's shrine applausiv<sup>o</sup> paeans rung;  
And Freedom's eager sons, in vain foretold  
A new Astrean reign,<sup>o</sup> an age of gold:  
She knows and she persists—Still Afric bleeds,  
15 Uncheck'd, the human traffic still proceeds;  
She stamps her infamy to future time,  
And on her harden'd forehead seals the crime.  
In vain, to thy white standard gathering round,  
Wit, Worth, and Parts and Eloquence are found:  
20 In vain, to push to birth thy great design,  
Contending chiefs, and hostile virtues join;  
All, from conflicting ranks, of power possest  
To rouse, to melt, or to inform the breast.  
Where seasoned tools of Avarice prevail,  
25 A Nation's eloquence, combined, must fail:  
Each flimsy sophistry by turns they try;  
The plausiv<sup>o</sup> argument, the daring lie,



The artful gloss, that moral sense confounds,  
Th' acknowledged thirst of gain that honour wounds:  
30 Bane of ingenuous minds, th' unfeeling sneer,  
Which, sudden, turns to stone the falling tear:  
They search assiduous, with inverted skill,  
For forms of wrong, and precedents of ill;  
With impious mockery wrest the sacred page,  
35 And glean up crimes from each remoter age:  
Wrung Nature's tortures, shuddering, while you tell,  
From scoffing fiends bursts forth the laugh of hell;  
In Britain's senate, Misery's pangs give birth  
To jests unseemly, and to horrid mirth—  
40 Forbear!—thy virtues but provoke our doom,  
And swell th' account of vengeance yet to come;  
For, not unmark'd in Heaven's impartial plan,  
Shall man, proud worm, condemn his fellow-man?  
And injur'd Afric, by herself redrest,  
45 Darts her own serpents at her Tyrant's breast.  
Each vice, to minds deprav'd by bondage known,  
With sure contagion fastens on his own;  
In sickly languors melts his nerveless frame,  
And blows to rage impetuous Passion's flame:  
50 Fermenting swift, the fiery venom gains  
The milky innocence of infant veins;  
There swells the stubborn will, damps learning's fire,  
The whirlwind wakes of uncontrol'd desire,  
Sears the young heart to images of woe,  
55 And blasts the buds of Virtue as they blow.<sup>o</sup>  
Lo! where reclin'd, pale Beauty courts the breeze,  
Diffus'd on sofas of voluptuous ease;  
With anxious awe, her menial train around,  
Catch her faint whispers of half-utter'd sound;  
60 See her, in monstrous fellowship, unite  
At once the Scythian, and the Sybarite;<sup>2</sup>  
Blending repugnant vices, misallied,

Which *frugal* nature purpos'd to divide;  
See her, with indolence to fierceness join'd,  
65 Of body delicate, infirm of mind,  
With languid tones imperious mandates urge;  
With arm recumbent wield the household scourge;  
And with unruffled mien, and placid sounds,  
Contriving torture, and inflicting wounds.  
70 Nor, in their palmy walks and spicy groves,  
The form benign of rural Pleasure roves;  
No milk-maid's song, or hum of village talk,  
Sooths the lone Poet in his evening walk:  
No willing arm the flail unwearied plies,  
75 Where the mix'd sounds of cheerful labour rise;  
No blooming maids and frolic swains are seen  
To pay gay homage to their harvest queen:  
No heart-expanding scenes their eyes must prove  
Of thriving industry, and faithful love:  
80 But shrieks and yells disturb the balmy air,  
Dumb sullen looks of woe announce despair,  
And angry eyes through dusky features glare.  
Far from the sounding lash the Muses fly,  
And sensual riot drowns each finer joy.  
85 Nor less from the gay East, on essenc'd wings,  
Breathing unnam'd perfumes, Contagion springs;  
The soft luxurious plague alike pervades  
The marble palaces, and rural shades;  
Hence, throng'd Augusta<sup>o</sup> builds her rosy bowers,  
90 And decks in summer wreaths her smoky towers;  
And hence, in summer bow'rs, Art's costly hand  
Pours courtly splendours o'er the dazzled land:  
The manners melt—One undistinguish'd blaze  
O'erwhelms the sober pomp of elder days;  
95 Corruption follows with gigantic stride,  
And scarce vouchsafes his shameless front to hide:  
The spreading leprosy taints ev'ry part,  
Infects each limb, and sickens at the heart.

100 Simplicity! most dear of rural maids,  
Weeping resigns her violated shades:  
Stern Independance from his glebe<sup>o</sup> retires,  
And anxious Freedom eyes her drooping fires;  
By foreign wealth are British morals chang'd,  
And Afric's sons, and India's, smile aveng'd.  
105 For you, whose temper'd ardour long has borne  
Untir'd the labour, and unmov'd the scorn;  
In Virtue's fasti<sup>o</sup> be inscrib'd your fame,  
And utter'd yours with Howard's honour'd name,<sup>3</sup>  
Friends of the friendless—Hail, ye generous band!  
110 Whose efforts yet arrest Heav'n's lifted hand,  
Around whose steady brows, in union bright,  
The civic wreath, and Christian's palm unite:  
Your merit stands, no greater and no less,  
Without, or with the varnish of success;  
115 But seek no more to break a Nation's fall,  
For ye have sav'd yourselves—and that is all.  
Succeeding times your struggles, and their fate,  
With mingled shame and triumph shall relate,  
While faithful History, in her various page,  
120 Marking the features of this motley age,  
To shed a glory, and to fix a stain,  
Tells how you strove, and that you strove in vain.

1791

## Endnotes

- Note 1: On April 18, 1791, the politician and humanitarian Wilberforce (1759–1833) presented a motion in the House of Commons to abolish the slave trade. The motion was rejected a day later by a vote of 163 to 88. Sixteen years passed before the trade was outlawed in the British West Indies (1807), and

another twenty-six before slavery itself was abolished (1833).[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: That is, the contraries of pastoral wildness and effeminate voluptuousness.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: John Howard (1726–1790), philanthropist and prison and public health reformer.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *approving*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *reign of justice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *false*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bloom*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *London*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cultivated land*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *records*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Rights of Woman<sup>1</sup>

Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!  
Woman! too long degraded, scorned, opprest;  
O born to rule in partial<sup>o</sup> Law's despite,  
Resume thy native empire o'er the breast!

5       Go forth arrayed in panoply<sup>o</sup> divine;  
That angel pureness which admits no stain;  
Go, bid proud Man his boasted rule resign,  
And kiss the golden sceptre of thy reign.

10       Go, gird thyself with grace; collect thy store  
Of bright artillery glancing from afar;  
Soft melting tones thy thundering cannon's roar,  
Blushes and fears thy magazine<sup>o</sup> of war.

15       Thy rights are empire: urge no meaner claim,—  
Felt, not defined, and if debated, lost;  
Like sacred mysteries, which withheld from fame,  
Shunning discussion, are revered the most.

20       Try all that wit and art suggest to bend  
Of thy imperial foe the stubborn knee;  
Make treacherous Man thy subject, not thy friend;  
Thou mayst command, but never canst be free.

Awe the licentious, and restrain the rude;  
Soften the sullen, clear the cloudy brow:  
Be, more than princes' gifts, thy favours sued;—  
She hazards all, who will the least allow.

But hope not, courted idol of mankind,  
On this proud eminence secure to stay;

25 Subduing and subdued, thou soon shalt find  
Thy coldness soften, and thy pride give way.

30 Then, then, abandon each ambitious thought,  
Conquest or rule thy heart shall feebly move,  
In Nature's school, by her soft maxims taught,  
That separate rights are lost in mutual love.

ca. 1792–95

1825

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A response—seemingly favorable until the last two stanzas—to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In chapter 4 of *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft had singled out Barbauld's poem "To a Lady with Some Painted Flowers" as evidence that even women of sense were capable of adopting the masculine-centered gender code that identified the feminine with the ornamental and the frivolous.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *biased*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *suit of armor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *storehouse of arms*[Return to reference °](#)

## To a Little Invisible Being Who Is Expected Soon to Become Visible

Germ of new life, whose powers expanding slow  
For many a moon their full perfection wait,—  
Haste, precious pledge of happy love, to go  
Auspicious borne through life's mysterious gate.

5      What powers lie folded in thy curious frame,—  
Senses from objects locked, and mind from thought!  
How little canst thou guess thy lofty claim  
To grasp at all the worlds the Almighty wrought!

10     And see, the genial season's warmth to share,  
Fresh younglings<sup>o</sup> shoot, and opening roses glow!  
Swarms of new life exulting fill the air,—  
Haste, infant bud of being, haste to blow!<sup>o</sup>

15     For thee the nurse prepares her lulling songs,  
The eager matrons count the lingering day;  
But far the most thy anxious parent longs  
On thy soft cheek a mother's kiss to lay.

20     She only asks to lay her burden down,  
That her glad arms that burden may resume;  
And nature's sharpest pangs her wishes crown,  
That free thee living from thy living tomb.

She longs to fold to her maternal breast  
Part of herself, yet to herself unknown;  
To see and to salute the stranger guest,  
Fed with her life through many a tedious moon.

25      Come, reap thy rich inheritance of love!  
Bask in the fondness of a Mother's eye!  
Nor wit nor eloquence her heart shall move  
Like the first accents of thy feeble cry.

30      Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!  
Launch on the living world, and spring to light!  
Nature for thee displays her various stores,  
Opens her thousand inlets of delight.

35      If charmed verse or muttered prayers had power,  
With favouring spells to speed thee on thy way,  
Anxious I'd bid my beads<sup>o</sup> each passing hour,  
Till thy wished smile thy mother's pangs o'erpay.<sup>o</sup>

ca. 1795?

1825

## Notes

- °: *young plants*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bloom*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *offer a prayer*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *more than compensate*[Return to reference °](#)



## Inscription for an Ice-House<sup>1</sup>

Stranger, approach! within this iron door  
Thrice locked and bolted, this rude arch beneath  
That vaults with ponderous stone the cell; confined  
By man, the great magician, who controuls  
5 Fire, earth and air, and genii of the storm,  
And bends the most remote and opposite things  
To do him service and perform his will,—  
A giant sits; stern Winter; here he piles,  
While summer glows around, and southern gales  
10 Dissolve the fainting world, his treasured snows  
Within the rugged cave.—Stranger, approach!  
He will not cramp thy limbs with sudden age,  
Nor wither with his touch the coyest flower  
That decks thy scented hair. Indignant hero,  
Like fettered Sampson when his might was spent  
15 In puny feats to glad the festive halls  
Of Gaza's wealthy sons;<sup>2</sup> or he who sat  
Midst laughing girls submiss, and patient twirled  
The slender spindle in his sinewy grasp;<sup>3</sup>  
The rugged power, fair Pleasure's minister,  
20 Exerts his art to deck the genial board;<sup>o</sup>  
Congeals the melting peach, the nectarine smooth,  
Burnished and glowing from the sunny wall;  
Darts sudden frost into the crimson veins  
Of the moist berry; moulds the sugared hail;<sup>4</sup>  
25 Cools with his icy breath our flowing cups;  
Or gives to the fresh dairy's nectared bowls  
A quicker zest. Sullen he plies his task,  
And on his shaking fingers counts the weeks  
Of lingering Summer, mindful of his hour

To rush in whirlwinds forth, and rule the year.

30

1795

1825

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Predating the modern refrigerator by centuries, buildings called icehouses were fashionable additions to the grounds of 18th-century manor houses. The ice they stored, usually obtained in winter from nearby ponds or rivers, would be used during the summer to preserve food, chill drinks, or make ice cream. Barbauld's inscription was composed for the icehouse built by a family friend, the reform-minded member of Parliament William Smith.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In Judges 16 the Israelite hero Sampson is captured by the Philistines following his betrayal by his wife, Delilah, who has cut his hair and robbed him of his strength. As Sampson's hair begins to grow back, he regains his powers, and his captors foolhardily arrange for him to entertain them in their temple with his feats of strength.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Barbauld refers to the episode in the adventures of Hercules in which the hero, in humiliating servitude under the queen of Lydia, puts down his weapons and assists Omphale and her waiting women with their spinning.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An echo of James Thomson's description in *The Seasons* (1743) of how the "grim tyrant," Winter, "arms his winds with all-subduing frost / Moulds his fierce hail, and treasures up his snows, / With which he now oppresses half the globe" (lines 898–901).[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *dining table*[Return to reference °](#)

# Washing-Day

*... and their voice,  
Turning again towards childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in its sound.<sup>1</sup>*

The Muses are turned gossips; they have lost  
The buskined<sup>o</sup> step, and clear high-sounding phrase,  
Language of gods. Come then, domestic Muse,  
In slipshod measure loosely prattling on  
5 Of farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream,  
Or drowning flies, or shoe lost in the mire  
By little whimpering boy, with rueful face;  
Come, Muse; and sing the dreaded Washing-Day.  
Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend,  
10 With bowed soul, full well ye ken<sup>o</sup> the day  
Which week, smooth sliding after week, brings on  
Too soon;—for to that day nor peace belongs  
Nor comfort;—ere the first gray streak of dawn,  
The red-armed washers come and chase repose.  
Nor pleasant smile, nor quaint device of mirth,  
15 E'er visited that day: the very cat,  
From the wet kitchen scared, and reeking hearth,  
Visits the parlour,—an unwonted<sup>o</sup> guest.  
The silent breakfast-meal is soon dispatched;  
Uninterrupted, save by anxious looks  
20 Cast at the lowering sky, if sky should lower.  
From that last evil, O preserve us, heavens!  
For should the skies pour down, adieu to all  
Remains of quiet: then expect to hear  
Of sad disasters,—dirt and gravel stains  
25 Hard to efface, and loaded lines at once

Snapped short,—and linen-horse<sup>o</sup> by dog thrown  
down,  
And all the petty miseries of life.  
Saints have been calm while stretched upon the  
rack,  
30 And Guatimozin<sup>2</sup> smiled on burning coals;  
But never yet did housewife notable  
Greet with a smile a rainy washing-day.  
—But grant the welkin<sup>o</sup> fair, require not thou  
Who call'st thyself perchance the master there,  
35 Or study swept or nicely dusted coat,  
Or usual 'tendance;—ask not, indiscreet,  
Thy stockings mended, though the yawning rents  
Gape wide as Erebus;<sup>o</sup> nor hope to find  
Some snug recess impervious: shouldst thou try  
The 'customed garden walks, thine eye shall rue  
40 The budding fragrance of thy tender shrubs,  
Myrtle or rose, all crushed beneath the weight  
Of coarse checked apron,—with impatient hand  
Twitched off when showers impend: or crossing lines  
Shall mar thy musings, as the wet cold sheet  
45 Flaps in thy face abrupt. Woe to the friend  
Whose evil stars have urged him forth to claim  
On such a day the hospitable rites!  
Looks, blank at best, and stinted courtesy,  
Shall he receive. Vainly he feeds his hopes  
50 With dinner of roast chicken, savoury pie,  
Or tart or pudding:—pudding he nor tart  
That day shall eat; nor, though the husband try,  
Mending what can't be helped, to kindle mirth  
From cheer deficient, shall his consort's brow  
55 Clear up propitious:—the unlucky guest  
In silence dines, and early slinks away.  
I well remember, when a child, the awe  
This day struck into me; for then the maids,

60 I scarce knew why, looked cross, and drove me from  
them;  
Nor soft caress could I obtain, nor hope  
Usual indulgencies; jelly or creams,  
Relic of costly suppers, and set by  
For me, their petted one; or buttered toast,  
When butter was forbid; or thrilling tale  
65 Of ghost or witch, or murder—so I went  
And sheltered me beside the parlour fire:  
There my dear grandmother, eldest of forms,  
Tended the little ones, and watched from harm,  
Anxiously fond, though oft her spectacles  
70 With elfin cunning hid, and oft the pins  
Drawn from her ravelled stocking, might have soured  
One less indulgent.—  
At intervals my mother's voice was heard,  
Urging dispatch: briskly the work went on,  
75 All hands employed to wash, to rinse, to wring,  
To fold, and starch, and clap,<sup>o</sup> and iron, and plait.  
Then would I sit me down, and ponder much  
Why washings were. Sometimes through hollow  
bowl  
Of pipe amused we blew, and sent aloft  
80 The floating bubbles; little dreaming then  
To see, Montgolfier,<sup>3</sup> thy silken ball  
Ride buoyant through the clouds—so near approach  
The sports of children and the toils of men.  
Earth, air, and sky, and ocean, hath its bubbles,<sup>4</sup>  
85 And verse is one of them—this most of all.

1797

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Loosely quoted from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* 2.7.160–62. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The last Aztec emperor (Cuanhtémoc, d. 1525), who was tortured and executed by the Spanish conquistadors. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Brothers Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier successfully launched the first hot-air balloon, at Annonay, France, in 1783. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Compare Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 1.3.77: "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has." [Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *tragic, elevated* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *know* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unaccustomed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *drying rack* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sky* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *the underworld* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *flatten* [Return to reference °](#)

# The Caterpillar

No, helpless thing, I cannot harm thee now;  
Depart in peace, thy little life is safe,  
For I have scanned thy form with curious eye,  
Noted the silver line that streaks thy back,  
The azure and the orange that divide  
5 Thy velvet sides; thee, houseless wanderer,  
My garment has enfolded, and my arm  
Felt the light pressure of thy hairy feet;  
Thou hast curled round my finger; from its tip,  
Precipitous descent! with stretched out neck,  
10 Bending thy head in airy vacancy,  
This way and that, inquiring, thou hast seemed  
To ask protection; now, I cannot kill thee.  
Yet I have sworn perdition to thy race,  
And recent from the slaughter am I come  
15 Of tribes and embryo nations: I have sought  
With sharpened eye and persecuting zeal,  
Where, folded in their silken webs they lay  
Thriving and happy; swept them from the tree  
And crushed whole families beneath my foot;  
20 Or, sudden, poured on their devoted heads  
The vials of destruction.—This I've done,  
Nor felt the touch of pity: but when thou,—  
A single wretch, escaped the general doom,  
Making me feel and clearly recognise  
25 Thine individual existence, life,  
And fellowship of sense with all that breathes,—  
Present'st thyself before me, I relent,  
And cannot hurt thy weakness.—So the storm  
Of horrid war, o'erwhelming cities, fields,  
30 And peaceful villages, rolls dreadful on:

The victor shouts triumphant; he enjoys  
The roar of cannon and the clang of arms,  
And urges, by no soft relentings stopped,  
The work of death and carnage. Yet should one,  
35 A single sufferer from the field escaped,  
Panting and pale, and bleeding at his feet,  
Lift his imploring eyes,—the hero weeps;  
He is grown human, and capricious Pity,  
Which would not stir for thousands, melts for one  
40 With sympathy spontaneous:—'Tis not Virtue,  
Yet 'tis the weakness of a virtuous mind.

ca. 1816?

1825

## Notes

- °: *doomed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pesticide*[Return to reference](#) °



# Science, Speculation, and Experiment

The Romantic period in literature coincided with an era of innovative experiments, ambitious theorizing, and sometimes wild speculation in the realms of science and technology. New technologies began to transform the social and physical landscape: steam power and mechanization sped production in factories and mines starting in the 1770s; gas lighting illuminated city streets starting in the early 1800s; by 1830, the first intercity railroad, connecting Manchester and Liverpool, had begun operation. As the British Empire expanded its political and commercial reach, scientific expeditions were dispatched around the globe, from the South Seas to the Arctic. William Herschel's discovery of the planet Uranus in 1781 enlarged the known solar system; his observations of nebulae, made in collaboration with his sister Caroline, gave insight into the birth and implosion of stars. A new approach to the life sciences was emerging, connecting the study of all kinds of organisms, from humans to plants—the term *biology* itself dates from around 1800. Chemistry coalesced in this period into a systematic science, and electricity was harnessed for novel experiments decomposing matter into elements or, famously, making the muscles of corpses twitch—seeming to suggest an electrical basis to animation.

The modern concept of the professional scientist was only just taking shape in the early nineteenth century, however; indeed, the very term *scientist* did not appear until the 1830s. *Natural philosophy* was the long-standing term still in use for research in physics, chemistry, and astronomy, though the inquiries of the “natural philosopher” typically ranged well beyond those disciplines in pursuit of the fundamental principles of both nature and mind. Exemplary in this regard was the polymathic Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), a Dissenting minister and educator, whose scientific discoveries

included photosynthesis and what we now call oxygen: author of over a hundred works, he wrote influentially on topics from electricity and chemistry to political theory, theology, grammar, and world history. The two poems by Priestley's friend Anna Letitia Barbauld that introduce this cluster take the natural philosopher's life of thought, writing, and experiment as their subject.

Traditionally, the sciences of botany, zoology, mineralogy, and geology fell into the separate category of "natural history." Appealing to the era's love of collecting, practiced by travelers in exotic locales or on a leisurely ramble close to home, the study of natural history, botany especially, became a popular craze; the subject was also a gold mine for publishers. In the *Natural History of Selborne* (1789), the clergyman Gilbert White drew on his observations of local nature, carefully recorded in daily journals, for chatty, essayistic descriptions of animal behavior and plant life that would be a prime influence on later ecological writing and thought, including that of poets such as John Clare. Poetry not only drew on scientific descriptions of natural beauty, but could be treated as in itself a medium for popularizing scientific ideas, as in the scientist-poet Erasmus Darwin's botanical epic *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), which renders Carl Linnaeus's taxonomy of flowers into heroic couplets.

This cluster aims to provide a sense of the wide variety of the period's science writing—the diversity of forms, audiences, and functions these examples have begun to suggest. Alongside excerpts from White's prose and Darwin's poetry, we include Caroline Herschel's 1787 letter to the Royal Society announcing her discovery of a new comet, a technical report of her findings which also rhetorically adjusts for her position as a woman writing to the all-male community of her brother William's "astronomical friends." We also include an excerpt from the brilliant chemist Humphry Davy's public lectures at the new Royal Institution in London (founded 1799), a key center for scientific activity. The final excerpt, from Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* (1834), shows how, on the cusp of the Victorian period, science was beginning to cohere into the disciplinary structures more familiar to



us; she envisions a broad popular appeal for scientific learning, cutting across class and gender divisions.



**Margaret Bryan.** Though excluded from the official scientific establishment, women writers in the Romantic period played an important role in broadening the audience for new scientific knowledge, especially through their authorship of popular educational works. Pictured in this frontispiece to Margaret Bryan's textbook *A Compendious System of Astronomy* (1797) is the author, quill in hand, accompanied by her two daughters, emphasizing Bryan's role as mother as well as writer and educator (she headed a London school for girls).

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While, in the eighteenth century, serious scientific research was considered principally the domain of men—especially the gentleman amateur, with leisure and wealth for such pursuits—our cluster also reflects the participation of a wider range of characters in Britain's scientific culture. Women could be crucial contributors to scientific discovery, as Caroline Herschel's accomplishments attest, and women writers played an especially important role in disseminating scientific knowledge, especially through works aimed at general audiences, such as Somerville's, or works for children. Though often facing skepticism grounded in class prejudice, men without the class background for a university degree could also make their mark in scientific research: these included Davy, whose formal education extended only to grammar school, and Davy's one-time assistant Michael Faraday (1791–1867), the pioneer of electromagnetism, who grew up in poverty.

But the notion of science is in flux in the period, with competing frameworks for understanding scientific inquiry itself. Radicals such as Priestley had an Enlightenment faith in the capacity of science to become, as he wrote in 1774, the "means, under God, of extirpating *all* error and prejudice," giving "the English hierarchy (if there be anything unsound in its constitution) . . . reason to tremble even at an air-pump, or an electrical machine." Especially following the French Revolution, conservatives painted such thinking as both ludicrous and dangerous; in 1791, a mob declaring loyalty to "church and king" rampaged through Priestley's Birmingham lab and library.



The confident vision of progress Davy sets out in his 1802 Royal Institution lecture is in some ways as sweeping as Priestley's, but likely far more comforting to his upper-class audience: appealing to a sense of national pride, Davy portrayed the astounding "new powers" of the scientist as providing a wealth of material benefits for society. Davy's assignment of wizardlike powers to the scientist would be ironically echoed in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the classic critique of outsized scientific ambition.

Frequently across the period's science writing, the rewards of scientific inquiry are framed in aesthetic terms, as connected to what Davy calls "the love of the beautiful and sublime," to pleasure and to awe. While some scientific thinkers pushed toward a thoroughgoing materialism—holding that everything existing, including consciousness, is reducible to physical phenomena—others reacted against such a mechanistic picture. For many, science was understood as a means of appreciating nature seen as God's providential creation. The clergyman William Paley's treatise *Natural Theology*, which offered the intricacy and "beauty" of living organisms as proof of a beneficent Creator, was set university reading.

At the same time, the communication of scientific knowledge was often designed to be not just useful, but entertaining; science books and periodicals, lectures, exhibits, and live demonstrations were after all competing in the marketplace—along with imaginative literature and popular entertainments of all kinds—for a share of the public's attention, and their appeal to the audience's aesthetic capacity for wonder, curiosity and pleasure can be understood in these terms as well. The selections in this cluster often blur the boundaries we are now accustomed to draw between the literary and the scientific; they can be approached both as documents in the history of science and as literary artifacts in their own right.

## **ANNA LETITIA BARBAULD**

The poet Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743–1825) formed a close friendship with the scientist and scholar Joseph Priestley in the intellectual circle around the Warrington Academy, the Nonconformist institution where Barbauld's father was a member of the faculty and where Priestley taught beginning in 1761. It is a revealing measure of the extraordinary range of Priestley's interests that this major contributor to scientific knowledge was in fact hired at Warrington as a tutor in classical and modern languages. During his time at Warrington, he also taught and published on history, published a widely used grammar textbook, and initiated influential curricular reforms. In 1767, Priestley moved to Leeds to take up a post as minister for a Dissenting congregation; there, he continued his scientific research and writing, while in other publications entering the fray of theological and political controversies. The poems that follow, occasioned by Barbauld's visits to the Priestley family in Leeds, offer a glimpse of the multifaceted intellectual labor on view in the household of the "natural philosopher." For more on Barbauld, see [pp. 41–42](#), above.

# The Mouse's Petition<sup>1</sup>

***Found in the trap where he had been confined all night by  
Dr. Priestley, for the sake of making experiments with  
different kinds of air***

"Parcere subjectis, et debellare superbos."

—Virgil

Oh hear a pensive prisoner's prayer,  
For liberty that sighs;  
And never let thine heart be shut  
Against the wretch's cries.

5 For here forlorn and sad I sit,  
Within the wiry gate;  
And tremble at th' approaching morn,  
Which brings impending fate.

10 If e'er thy breast with freedom glow'd,  
And spurn'd a tyrant's chain,  
Let not thy strong oppressive force  
A free-born mouse detain.

15 Oh do not stain with guiltless blood  
Thy hospitable hearth;  
Nor triumph that thy wiles betray'd  
A prize so little worth.

The scatter'd gleanings of a feast  
My frugal meals supply;  
But if thine unrelenting heart  
That slender boon deny,

20 The cheerful light, the vital air,  
Are blessings widely given;  
Let nature's commoners enjoy  
The common gifts of heaven.

25 The well-taught philosophic mind  
To all compassion gives;  
Casts round the world an equal eye,  
And feels for all that lives.

30 If mind, as ancient sages taught,<sup>2</sup>  
A never dying flame,  
Still shifts through matter's varying forms,  
In every form the same,

35 Beware, lest in the worm you crush  
A brother's soul you find;  
And tremble lest thy luckless hand  
Dislodge a kindred mind.

40 Or, if this transient gleam of day  
Be *all* of life we share,  
Let pity plead within thy breast  
That little *all* to spare.

So may thy hospitable board  
With health and peace be crown'd;  
And every charm of heartfelt ease  
Beneath thy roof be found.

45 So, when destruction lurks unseen,  
Which men, like mice, may share,  
May some kind angel clear thy path,  
And break the hidden snare.



## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
The imagined speaker in this poem (the petitioning mouse) is destined to participate in just the sort of experiment that would lead Priestley, in a few years, to the discovery of the gas we now know as oxygen (Priestley's more cumbersome term, involving a then-current theory positing a substance called "phlogiston" supposedly released by combustion, was "dephlogisticated air"). Tradition has it that when Barbauld showed him the lines, Priestley set the mouse free. According to Barbauld's modern editors, the poem was many times reprinted and was a favorite to assign students for memorizing. The Latin epigraph is from the *Aeneid* 6.853, "To  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Lines 29–36 play on the idea of transmigration of souls, a doctrine that Priestley believed until the early 1770s.[Return to reference 2](#)

## An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley's Study

A map of every country known,<sup>1</sup>  
With not a foot of land his own.  
A list of folks that kicked a dust  
On this poor globe, from Ptol. the First;<sup>2</sup>  
He hopes,—indeed it is but fair,—  
5 Some day to get a corner there.  
A group of all the British kings,  
Fair emblem! on a packthread swings.  
The Fathers, ranged in goodly row,<sup>3</sup>  
A decent, venerable show,  
10 Writ a great while ago, they tell us,  
And many an inch o'ertop their fellows.  
A Juvenal<sup>4</sup> to hunt for mottos;  
And Ovid's tales of nymphs and grottos.<sup>5</sup>  
The meek-robed lawyers, all in white;  
15 Pure as the lamb,—at least, to sight.  
A shelf of bottles, jar and phial,<sup>o</sup>  
By which the rogues he can defy all,—  
All filled with lightning keen and genuine,  
And many a little imp he'll pen you in;  
20 Which, like Le Sage's sprite, let out,  
Among the neighbours makes a rout;<sup>6</sup>  
Brings down the lightning on their houses,  
And kills their geese, and frights their spouses.  
A rare thermometer, by which  
25 He settles, to the nicest pitch,  
The just degrees of heat, to raise  
Sermons, or politics, or plays.  
Papers and books, a strange mixed olio,

30 From shilling touch<sup>o</sup> to pompous folio;  
 Answer, remark, reply, rejoinder,  
 Fresh from the mint, all stamped and coined here;  
 Like new-made glass, set by to cool,  
 Before it bears the workman's tool.  
 35 A blotted proof-sheet, wet from Bowling.<sup>7</sup>  
 —"How can a man his anger hold in?"—  
 Forgotten rimes, and college themes,  
 Worm-eaten plans, and embryo schemes;—  
 A mass of heterogeneous matter,  
 A chaos dark, nor land nor water;—  
 40 New books, like new-born infants, stand,  
 Waiting the printer's clothing hand;—  
 Others, a motley ragged brood,  
 Their limbs unfashioned all, and rude,  
 Like Cadmus' half-formed men appear;<sup>8</sup>  
 45 One rears a helm, one lifts a spear,  
 And feet were lopped and fingers torn  
 Before their fellow limbs were born;  
 A leg began to kick and sprawl  
 Before the head was seen at all,  
 50 Which quiet as a mushroom lay  
 Till crumbling hillocks gave it way;  
 And all, like controversial writing,  
 Were born with teeth, and sprung up fighting.  
 "But what is this," I hear you cry,  
 55 "Which saucily provokes my eye?"—  
 A thing unknown, without a name,  
 Born of the air and doomed to flame.

ca. 1771

1825

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The maps, historical charts, books, and scientific apparatus are all part of the "furniture" (furnishings) of Joseph Priestley's study.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Ptolemy I (ca. 367–283 B.C.E.), founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The works of the Catholic Church Fathers.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Roman satirist.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In René LeSage's *Le Diable boiteux* (1707), a laboratory-created spirit lifts the roofs from the neighbors' houses, exposing their private lives and creating havoc.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Presumably a local printer.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Armed men created when Cadmus sowed the earth with the teeth of a dragon he had killed (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 3.95–114).[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *via*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cheap pamphlet*[Return to reference °](#)

## CAROLINE HERSCHEL

The accomplishments of Caroline Herschel (1750–1848), both as an assistant to her older brother William—England’s most lauded astronomer—and as an astronomer in her own right, have been the subject of important discussion in the history of science about what kinds of work gets valued, and how, in accounts of scientific discovery. (The sibling relationship has often been compared to the gifted Dorothy Wordsworth’s devoted relationship to her famous brother William.) When, at age twenty-two, Caroline arrived in England from her native Hanover in what is now Germany, it was not a scientific but a musical career she had in her sights: the Herschels were a family of musicians, and William, then chief organist at the Octagon Chapel in Bath, had asked his sister to join him, with the idea of training her as his vocal accompanist. The invitation offered Caroline an escape from a confining life of drudgery in her family home. A remarkably quick study, Caroline was soon appearing to acclaim in vocal performances on the Bath stage. In the following years, however, music was sidelined for both siblings, as William’s hobby of making astronomical investigations grew into an all-consuming occupation. William’s stunning discovery of the planet Uranus, in 1781, made him a celebrity; after he accepted a royal pension, Caroline moved with him, in 1782, to a newly constructed observatory near Windsor Castle. Caroline learned the mathematics required to keep records of astronomical observations and to carry out laborious calculations. In addition to running the household until William’s marriage in 1788, Caroline stayed up through often frigid nights, managing the equipment and data, and in spare moments, she spent time “minding the skies” (in her own phrase) with a telescope William presented her specifically for “comet hunting.” In 1787, Caroline was granted her own royal pension of fifty pounds per annum—the first British woman scientist to receive a salary.

Despite the modesty of her address to her “brother’s astronomical friends,” Caroline’s report to the Royal Society of her discovery of a new comet—notably, made when William is away—asserts her scientific and mathematical capabilities in what was understood to be a male domain. The letter marks a milestone as the first paper by a woman read at the society, which would not admit women as fellows until the twentieth century. If the comet itself was not especially “grand or striking” in appearance, it caused excitement as “the first lady’s comet,” as the novelist Frances Burney commented in her diary after viewing it from the Royal Observatory. Herschel would go on to discover a further seven comets, though perhaps her more significant contribution came in the joint labor with her brother that took the number of known nebulae from less than a hundred to over two thousand, providing the basis for a deeper understanding of the processes shaping the cosmos.

# An Account of a New Comet

SIR,

In consequence of the friendship which I know to exist between you and my Brother, I venture to trouble you in his absence with the following imperfect account of a comet.<sup>1</sup>

The employment of writing down the observations, when my Brother uses the 20-feet reflector, does not often allow me time to look at the heavens; but as he is now on a visit to Germany, I have taken the opportunity of his absence to *sweep* in the neighbourhood of the sun, in search of comets;<sup>2</sup> and last night, the 1st of August, about 10 o'clock, I found an object very much resembling in colour and brightness the 27th nebula of the *Connoissance des Temps*,<sup>3</sup> with the difference however of being round. I suspected it to be a comet; but a haziness coming on, it was not possible intirely to satisfy myself as to its motion till this evening. I made several drawings of the stars in the field of view with it, and have inclosed a copy of them, with my observations annexed, that you may compare them together.

August 1, 1786, 9 h. 50', the object in the center is like a star out of focus, while the rest are perfectly distinct, and I suspect it to be a comet.<sup>4</sup>

10 h. 33', fig. 2. the suspected comet makes now a perfect isosceles triangle with the two stars *a* and *b*.<sup>5</sup>

11 h. 8', I think the situation of the comet is now as in fig. 3.; but it is so hazy that I cannot sufficiently see the small star *b* to be assured of the motion.

By the naked eye the comet is between the 54th and 53d Ursæ majoris, and the 14th, 15th, and 16th Comæ Berenices,<sup>6</sup> and makes an obtuse triangle with them, the vertex of which is turned towards the south.

August 2. 10 h. 9', the comet is now, with respect to the stars *a* and *b*,<sup>2</sup> situated as in fig. 4. therefore the motion since last night is evident.

10 h. 30', another considerable star *c* may be taken into the field with it, by placing *a* in the center; when the comet and the other star will both appear in the circumference, as in fig. 5.

These observations were made with a Newtonian sweeper of 27 inches focal length, and a power of about 20, the field of view is 2° 12'. I cannot find the stars *a* and *c* in any catalogue; but suppose they may easily be traced in the heavens; whence the situation of the comet, as it was last night at 10 h. 33', may be pretty nearly ascertained.

You will do me the favour of communicating these observations to my brother's astronomical friends.

I have the honour to be, &c.

CAROLINE HERSCHEL

## 1786 **Endnotes**

1787

- Note 1: The report is addressed to physician and scientist Sir Charles Blagden (1748–1820), then secretary of the Royal Society.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2:  
"Sweep": a telescopic scan of a segment of the night sky, with the telescope held at a fixed elevation so that celestial objects drift across the field. "Reflector": a type of telescope, sometimes called "Newtonian," relying on mirrors rather than lenses to avoid color distortion. The Herschels' telescopes, sold to astronomers across Europe, were famous for their precision and power; the 20-foot reflector, one of the largest telescopes extant at the time, was considered a marvel.  
[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An almanaclike compendium of "ephemerides," or tables giving positions in the sky for astronomical objects over a



sequence of dates, published annually in France since 1679.

“Nebula”: stellar cloud of dust and gas.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: In her diary for August 1, Herschel wrote, “I have counted one hundred nebulae to-day, and this evening I saw an object which I believe will prove to-morrow night to be a comet”; on August 2, she wrote, “The object of last night *is a comet.*” Astronomers identify the comet as Comet C/1786 P1 (Herschel).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Herschel drew detailed diagrams, or figures, plotting her observed data.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Constellations neighboring each other (the Latin names translate as “Great Bear” and “the Hair of Berenice”).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7:

A doubt having arisen about the identity of the stars marked *a* and *b* in the figures, I have examined that part of the heavens in which the comet was the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, in order to settle this point, but find so many small stars in that neighbourhood that I have not been able to fix on any of them that will exactly answer these figures; and as they were drawn from observations made by moonlight, twilight, hazy weather, and very near the horizon, it would not be at all surprising if a mistake had been made: however, as these figures were only given with a view to show the motion of the comet, the conclusion of the change of place, which was drawn from

[Return to reference 7](#)

## GILBERT WHITE

One of the most enduringly popular works of nature writing in the English language, Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* (1789) is a country clergyman's affectionate, wonder-filled account of the plant and animal life of the Hampshire village where he spent almost his entire life. The book demonstrates White's proposition that "all nature is so full, that that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined." Relying on decades' worth of his observational journals, White (1720–1793) frames the text as a series of letters to two friends, the wealthy amateur naturalist Daines Barrington and the eminent zoologist Thomas Pennant, both of whom White had met through the London bookshop of his brother Benjamin, a printer—from whom White also learned that books on natural history tended to sell briskly. The original edition's full title, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, reflects White's inclusion of an account of local sites of historical interest; this was generally dropped from later editions. *Selborne's* initial reception can be gauged from its influence on other writers in this anthology, including Dorothy Wordsworth and John Clare; Charlotte Smith and Erasmus Darwin both cite White as an authority. Nineteenth-century audiences elevated White's work into a cherished classic, sending it through an astonishing number of editions. For Victorian readers, the book offered at once a nostalgic picture of the rural English parish, and a model of attention to the natural world they could emulate and apply to their own environs.

*Selborne* inspired later conservation efforts, and many critics have argued White helped initiate modern "ecological" literature. *Selborne* evolves, though, from a tradition of nature writing stretching from the classical *Eclogues* and *Georgics* of Virgil through the eighteenth-century poet James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730). The twentieth-century modernist Virginia Woolf remarked that White's skill with detail and scene setting reflects the vibrancy of

another eighteenth-century genre—the novel—with the difference that “the story of Selborne is a vegetable, an animal story. The gossip is about the habits of vipers and the love interest is supplied chiefly by frogs.” As Woolf observed, White finds a world of delight in the very small. Despite his interest in what he calls the “wonderful spirit of sociality in the brute creation,” and in the “artistry” animals can display, such as birds’ songs or nest building, White’s evocation of animal character does not reduce animals to mere projections of human personality: rather, he marvels at their difference from the human, and does not shy away from nature’s violence, as the ending to our selection on the language of birds demonstrates.

## ***From The Natural History of Selborne***

March 9, 1772

As a gentleman and myself were walking on the 4th of last November round the sea-banks at Newhaven,<sup>1</sup> near the mouth of the Lewes river, in pursuit of natural knowledge, we were surprised to see three house-swallows gliding very swiftly by us. That morning was rather chilly, with the wind at north-west; but the tenor of the weather for some time before had been delicate, and the noons remarkably warm. From this incident, and from repeated accounts which I meet with, I am more and more induced to believe that many of the swallow kind do not depart from this island, but lay themselves up in holes and caverns, and do, insect-like and bat-like, come forth at mild times, and then retire again to their *latebrae*.<sup>2</sup> Nor make I the least doubt but that, if I lived at Newhaven, Seaford, Brighthelmstone, or any of those towns near the chalk cliffs of the Sussex coast, by proper observations, I should see swallows stirring at periods of the winter, when the noons were soft and inviting, and the sun warm and invigorating. And I am the more of this opinion from what I have remarked during some of our late springs, that though some swallows did make their appearance about the usual time, viz. the 13th or 14th of April, yet, meeting with an harsh reception, and blustering cold north-east winds, they immediately withdrew, absconding for several days, till the weather gave them better encouragement.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

Sept. 9, 1778

FROM the motion of birds, the transition is natural enough to their notes and language, of which I shall say something. Not that I would pretend to understand their language like the vizier, who, by the recital of a conversation which passed between two owls,

reclaimed a sultan,<sup>1</sup> before delighting in conquest and devastation; but I would be thought only to mean that many of the winged tribes have various sounds and voices adapted to express their various passions, wants, and feelings, such as anger, fear, love, hatred, hunger, and the like. All species are not equally eloquent; some are copious and fluent, as it were, in their utterance, while others are confined to a few important sounds; no bird, like the fish kind, is quite mute, though some are rather silent. The language of birds is very ancient, and like other ancient modes of speech, very elliptical; little is said, but much is meant and understood.

The notes of the eagle kind are shrill and piercing; and about the season of nidification<sup>2</sup> much diversified, as I have been often assured by a curious observer of Nature, who long resided at Gibraltar, where eagles abound. The notes of our hawks much resemble those of the king of birds. Owls have very expressive notes; they hoot in a fine vocal sound, much resembling the *vox humana*,<sup>3</sup> and reducible by a pitch-pipe to a musical key. This note seems to express complacency and rivalry among the males; they use also a quick call and an horrible scream; and can snore and hiss when they mean to menace. Ravens, besides their loud croak, can exert a deep and solemn note that makes the woods to echo; the amorous sound of a crow is strange and ridiculous; rooks, in the breeding season, attempt sometimes, in the gaiety of their hearts, to sing, but with no great success; the parrot-kind have many modulations of voice, as appears by their aptitude to learn human sounds; doves coo in an amorous and mournful manner, and are emblems of despairing lovers; the woodpecker sets up a sort of loud and hearty laugh; the fern-owl or goat-sucker, from the dusk till daybreak, serenades his mate with the clattering of castanets. All the tuneful *passeres*<sup>4</sup> express their complacency by sweet modulations, and a variety of melody. The swallow, as has been observed in a former letter, by a shrill alarm bespeaks the attention of the other *hirundines*,<sup>5</sup> and bids them be aware that the hawk is at hand. Aquatic and gregarious birds, especially the nocturnal, that shift their quarters in the dark, are very noisy and loquacious; as

cranes, wild-geese, wild-ducks, and the like; their perpetual clamour prevents them from dispersing and losing their companions.

In so extensive a subject, sketches and outlines are as much as can be expected: for it would be endless to instance in all the infinite variety of the feathered nation. We shall therefore confine the remainder of this letter to the few domestic fowls of our yards, which are most known, and therefore best understood. And first, the peacock, with his gorgeous train, demands our attention; but, like most of the gaudy birds, his notes are grating and shocking to the ear; the yelling of cats, and the braying of an ass, are not more disgusting. The voice of the goose is trumpet-like, and clanking; and once saved the Capitol at Rome, as grave historians assert: the hiss also of the gander is formidable and full of menace, and "protective of his young." <sup>6</sup> Among ducks the sexual distinction of voice is remarkable; for while the quack of the female is loud and sonorous, the voice of the drake is inward, and harsh, and feeble, and scarce discernible. The cock turkey struts and gobbles to his mistress in a most uncouth manner; he hath also a pert and petulant note when he attacks his adversary. When a hen turkey leads forth her young brood, she keeps a watchful eye: and if a bird of prey appear, though ever so high in the air, the careful mother announces the enemy with a little inward moan, and watches him with a steady and attentive look; but, if he approach, her note becomes earnest and alarming, and her outcries are redoubled.

No inhabitants of a yard seem possessed of such a variety of expression, and so copious a language, as common poultry. Take a chicken of four or five days old, and hold it up to a window where there are flies, and it will immediately seize its prey with little twitterings of complacency; but if you tender it a wasp or a bee, at once its note becomes harsh and expressive of disapprobation and a sense of danger. When a pullet is ready to lay, she intimates the event by a joyous and easy soft note. Of all the occurrences of their life, that of laying seems to be the most important; for no sooner has a hen disburdened herself, than she rushes forth with a clamorous kind of joy, which the cock and the rest of his mistresses

immediately adopt. The tumult is not confined to the family concerned, but catches from yard to yard, and spreads to every homestead within hearing, till at last the whole village is in an uproar. As soon as a hen becomes a mother, her new relation demands a new language; she then runs clucking and screaming about, and seems agitated as if possessed. The father of the flock has also a considerable vocabulary; if he finds food, he calls a favourite concubine to partake; and if a bird of prey passes over, with a warning voice he bids his family beware. The gallant chanticler<sup>7</sup> has, at command, his amorous phrases and his terms of defiance. But the sound by which he is best known is his crowing: by this he has been distinguished in all ages as the countryman's clock or larum, as the watchman that proclaims the divisions of the night. Thus the poet elegantly styles him

The crested cock, whose clarion sounds  
The silent hours.<sup>8</sup>

A neighbouring gentleman one summer had lost most of his chickens by a sparrow-hawk, that came gliding down between a faggot pile<sup>9</sup> and the end of his house to the place where the coops stood. The owner, inwardly vexed to see his flock thus diminishing, hung a setting net adroitly between the pile and the house, into which the caitiff dashed, and was entangled. Resentment suggested the law of retaliation; he therefore clipped the hawk's wings, cut off his talons, and fixing a cork on his bill, threw him down among the brood-hens. Imagination cannot paint the scene that ensued; the expressions that fear, rage, and revenge inspired, were new, or at least such as had been unnoticed before. The exasperated matrons upbraided, they execrated, they insulted, they triumphed. In a word, they never desisted from buffeting their adversary till they had torn him in a hundred pieces.

1789

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Town on the Sussex coast, some sixty miles from Selborne.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Refuges (from the Latin for hiding places). Throughout *Selborne*, White is preoccupied by the mystery of where swallows go between their annual “disappearance” in the fall and their return in the spring—do they overwinter by hibernating on English territory, as White (mistakenly) insists, or do they migrate to distant shores? Charlotte Smith’s “The Swallow” (see p. 82, below) muses on the same question, citing White.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The detailed observational journals White keeps over many years attune him to the seasonal rhythms and habitual behaviors of the species he observes, but also allow him to recognize the surprise of departures from pattern.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 1: White cites the retelling of an Arabian folktale in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s journal *Spectator* 521 (Oct. 17, 1712). In the story, a vizier (top minister or official) who pretends to understand the language of birds uses his purported translation of the owls’ conversation as an indirect means to deliver moral advice to the sultan, and so “reclaim” him from his propensity to violence.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Nest building. White’s brother John, a chaplain at the British naval base at Gibraltar on the Spanish coast, was a source for comparative observations of bird activity.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: From the Latin for “human voice,” a name for a musical tone produced by a specific pipe organ setting, or “stop,” thought to resemble the sound of human singing.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In White’s usage, the first recorded by the *OED*, the order of perching birds, or songbirds.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Members of the *Hirundinidae* (swallows) family of songbirds, including swallows and martins.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6:



According to legend, when the Gauls laid siege to Rome in the 4th century B.C.E., a sneak attack under cover of night was foiled by the honking of the geese, sacred to Juno, who lived in the temple dedicated to the goddess on the city's Capitoline Hill. The quoted phrase is from the "Spring" section of James Thomson's *The Seasons*, where it describes not the gander but the "stately-sailing swan" (lines 775–79). White's debt to Thomson's catalogs of birds and beasts is significant.

[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Rooster.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Milton, *Paradise Lost* 7.443–44. White again nods to earlier poetic catalogs of birds, here Milton's catalog of birds at the creation.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Pile of sticks.[Return to reference 9](#)

## ERASMUS DARWIN

The physician and intellectual Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802) maintained many scientific hobbies, including botany, a field whose popularity in the eighteenth century owed much to the work of the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778). Linnaean taxonomies, or modes of classifying different plant and animal species, provided a systematic organization for the study of the natural world; by enlisting “Imagination under the banner of Science,” Darwin’s 1789 poem *The Loves of the Plants* sought to make Linnaeus’s scheme more appealing and digestible for readers, especially the young ladies for whom botany was considered an elegant and safe scientific pastime.

Linnaeus had arranged plants into various classes according to their number and arrangement of reproductive organs (“male” stamens and “female” pistils), on analogy to human sexuality and marriage. Darwin’s poem playfully follows this sexual analogy—scandalizing some readers—but at the same time, its imagination of a plant-world organized around pleasure also suggests a more serious engagement with the notion that plants might indeed “love,” and with questions of plant sensation and sentience to which other flower-obsessed Romantic poets frequently recur. In 1791, *The Loves of the Plants* was included as part 2 of *The Botanic Garden*, whose other sections, under the title *The Economy of Vegetation*, distill into lofty verse scientific discoveries in astronomy, geology, chemistry, and other fields, and then expand on these theories in spiraling speculative prose footnotes. Though Darwin’s ornate style fell out of fashion—Byron dismisses “flimsy Darwin’s pompous chime”—his works remained a source of ideas and inspiration for later writers: Mary Shelley credits Darwin’s speculation on reanimation with one germ of the story for *Frankenstein*; his thinking about evolution in his later treatise *Zoonomia, or the Laws of*

*Organic Life* (1794–96) in some respects anticipates that of his famous grandson, Charles.

# ***From The Loves of the Plants***

## ***Proem***<sup>1</sup>

GENTLE READER!

Lo, here a CAMERA OBSCURA<sup>2</sup> is presented to thy view, in which are lights and shades dancing on a whited canvas, and magnified into apparent life!—if thou art perfectly at leisure for such trivial amusement, walk in, and view the wonders of my INCHANTED GARDEN.

Whereas P. OVIDIUS NASO,<sup>3</sup> a great Necromancer in the famous Court of AUGUSTUS CÆSAR , did by art poetic transmute Men, Women, and even Gods and Goddesses, into Trees and Flowers; I have undertaken by similar art to restore some of them to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions; and have here exhibited them before thee. Which thou may'st contemplate as diverse little pictures suspended over the chimney of a Lady's dressing-room, *connected only by a slight festoon of ribbons.*<sup>4</sup> And which, though thou may'st not be acquainted with the originals, may amuse thee by the beauty of their persons, their graceful attitudes, or the brilliancy of their dress.

FAREWELL.

## ***Canto I***

Descend, ye hovering Sylphs! aerial Quires,<sup>5</sup>  
And sweep with little hands your silver lyres;  
With fairy footsteps print your grassy rings,  
Ye Gnomes! accordant to the tinkling strings;  
While in soft notes I tune to oaten reed  
5 Gay hopes, and amorous sorrows of the mead.—  
From giant Oaks, that wave their branches dark,  
To the dwarf Moss, that clings upon their bark,

What Beaux and Beauties crowd the gaudy groves,  
And woo and win their vegetable Loves.<sup>6</sup>  
10 How Snowdrops cold, and blue-eyed Harebells blend  
Their tender tears, as o'er the stream they bend;  
The lovesick Violet, and the Primrose pale  
Bow their sweet heads, and whisper to the gale;  
With secret sighs the Virgin Lily droops,  
15 And jealous Cowslips hang their tawny cups.  
How the young Rose in beauty's damask pride  
Drinks the warm blushes of his bashful bride;  
With honey'd lips enamour'd Woodbines<sup>7</sup> meet,  
Clasp with fond arms, and mix their kisses sweet.—  
20

Stay thy soft-murmuring waters, gentle Rill;  
Hush, whispering Winds, ye rustling Leaves, be still;  
Rest, silver Butterflies, your quivering wings;  
Alight ye Beetles, from your airy rings;  
25 Ye painted Moths, your gold-eyed plumage furl,  
Bow your wide horns, your spiral trunks uncurl;  
Glitter, ye Glow-worms,<sup>8</sup> on your mossy beds;  
Descend, ye Spiders, on your lengthened threads;  
Slide here, ye horned Snails, with varnish'd shells;  
30 Ye Bee-nymphs, listen in your waxen cells!

BOTANIC MUSE! who in this latter age  
Led by your airy hand the Swedish sage,  
Bade his keen eye your secret haunts explore  
On dewy dell, high wood, and winding shore;  
Say on each leaf how tiny Graces dwell;  
35 How laugh the Pleasures in a blossom's bell;  
How insect Loves arise on cobweb wings,  
Aim their light shafts, and point their little stings.

\* \* \*

Weak with nice<sup>9</sup> sense, the chaste Mimosa stands,

From each rude touch withdraws her timid hands;<sup>9</sup>  
Oft as light clouds o'er-pass the Summer-glade,  
Alarm'd she trembles at the moving shade;  
And feels, alive through all her tender form,  
305 The whisper'd murmurs of the gathering storm;  
Shuts her sweet eye-lids to approaching night,  
And hails with freshen'd charms the rising light.  
Veil'd, with gay decency and modest pride,  
Slow to the mosque she moves, an eastern bride;  
310 There her soft vows unceasing love record,  
Queen of the bright seraglio<sup>o</sup> of her Lord.—  
So sinks or rises with the changeful hour  
The liquid silver in its glassy tower.  
So turns the needle to the pole it loves,  
315 With fine librations<sup>1</sup> quivering, as it moves.

\* \* \*

Where frowning Snowden bends his dizzy brow  
O'er Conway, listening to the surge below;<sup>2</sup>  
Retiring Lichen<sup>3</sup> climbs the topmost stone,  
And drinks the aerial solitude alone.—  
350 Bright shine the stars unnumber'd *o'er her head*,  
And the cold moon-beam gilds her flinty bed;  
While round the rifted rocks hoarse whirlwinds  
breathe,  
And dark with thunder sail the clouds *beneath*.—  
The steepy path her plighted swain pursues,  
355 And tracks her light steps o'er th' imprinted dews;  
Delighted Hymen<sup>o</sup> gives his torch to blaze,  
Winds round the craggs, and lights the mazy ways;  
Sheds o'er their *secret* vows his influence chaste,  
And decks with roses the admiring waste.

360

1789, 1791

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A preface or preamble.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: From the Latin for “dark room”; an optical device consisting of a room or box with a single hole to admit light. Light passing through the hole projects inverted images onto a whitened wall or canvas opposite.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Ovid (43 B.C.E.–18 C.E.), Roman poet whose *Metamorphoses* recounts myths of the transformation of persons into flowers or animals.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Comparing the poem’s images to pictures in a lady’s dressing-room, Darwin evokes the setting of Pope’s mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* (1717), a clear antecedent. Darwin’s advertisement proposes the poem’s general design is to lead readers from “the looser analogies, which dress out the imagery of poetry, to the stricter ones, which form the ratiocination of philosophy.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: An alternate spelling of “choirs,” possibly also punning on a quire of paper (a collection of sheets, or a small book made from folded sheets of paper). “Sylphs”: spirits of the air, as “Gnomes” (line 4) are imaginary creatures of the earth. Derived from 17th-century occult writings, sylphs, gnomes, and other “sprites” are part of Pope’s machinery in *The Rape of the Lock*.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6:  
“Vegetable loves.” Linneus, the celebrated Swedish naturalist, has demonstrated that all flowers contain families of males or females, or both; and on their marriages has constructed his invaluable system of Botany [*Darwin’s note*]. Linnaeus’s system classes plants by “marriages,” a figure for the distribution of “male” and “female” reproductive organs in their flowers. Thus the sensitive plant or Mimosa below belongs to the class “Polygamy,” having “male or female flowers on one or more plants, which have at the same time flowers of both sexes”; th

class "Polvandria" has many stamens in one flower; in the class  
[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Honeysuckle. The other plants mentioned in lines 11–16 are common wildflowers.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Small beetles related to American fireflies; the female of the European glow-worm is wingless and has a brighter light than the male.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9:

*Mimosa*. \* \* \* The sensitive plant. Of the class Polygamy, one house. Naturalists have not explained the immediate cause of the collapsing of the sensitive-plant; the leaves meet and close in the night during the sleep of the plant, or when exposed to much cold in the day-time, in the same manner as when they are affected by external violence, folding their upper surfaces together, and in part over each other like scales or tiles; so as to expose as little of the upper surface as may be to the air; but do not indeed collapse quite so far, since I have found, when touched in the night during their sleep, they fall still further; especially when touched on the

[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Oscillations (usually applied to the optical effect by which the moon can sometimes appear to wobble, as viewed from earth). Darwin compares the sensitive plant's opening toward the sun to the action of mercury in a thermometer, or a compass needle drawn magnetically toward the earth's pole.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Mount Snowdon overlooks the town and river Conway (Welsh spelling Conwy) in Wales.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3:  
*Lichen*. \* \* \* Calcareum. Liver-wort. Clandestine Marriage. This plant is the first that vegetates on naked rocks, covering them with a kind of tapestry, and draws its nourishment perhaps chiefly from the air; after it perishes, earth enough is left for the mosses to root themselves; and after some ages a soil is produced sufficient for the growth of more succulent and large vegetables. In this manner perhaps the whole earth has been



gradually covered with vegetation, after it was raised out of the primeval ocean by subterranean fires [*Darwin's note*].

"Clandestine Marriage" represents "cryptogams," plants, such as lichens or ferns, that reproduce by distributing spores. With no visible flowers, their reproductive organs are "hidden." In the geological speculation with which the footnote concludes, Darwin combines two then-current theories of the formation of the earth's geological features, one (the Neptunian) holding they were created by the force of oceans that were imagined to have once submerged all land, the other (the Vulcanian) holding they were created by centuries of volcanic action.

[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *delicate, shy*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *harem*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *god of marriage*[Return to reference °](#)

# HUMPHRY DAVY

Among the most accomplished experimental scientists of his era, Humphry Davy (1778–1829) was also a gifted orator with a talent for showmanship. Davy's popular public lectures, beginning in 1801, before the fashionable audiences of both men and women at London's Royal Institution introduced cutting-edge research in chemistry and electricity, fields then making astonishingly rapid advances—and well suited to live demonstrations. Just a few years earlier, in 1799, the Italian scientist Alessandro Volta had invented an electric battery, known as the "Voltaic pile," that allowed experimenters to decompose compound substances into elements by introducing an electric charge. Davy would soon isolate elements including potassium and sodium through this means. The large electrical apparatuses Davy had constructed in the Royal Institution from 1803 on contributed to a new image of the scientific genius as the master of powerful laboratory devices.

Just twenty-two when he was hired by the Royal Institution, Davy had previously been employed at the Pneumatic Institute in Bristol, run by the doctor and radical thinker Thomas Beddoes, who hoped inhaled gases might provide inexpensive miracle cures for the poor. There, Davy conducted pathbreaking experiments on the effects of nitrous oxide, or "laughing gas," testing the gas on himself and on friends, including the poets Coleridge and Robert Southey. In the concluding section of this excerpt from his 1802 Royal Institution lecture, Davy distances himself and his vision of science from the radicalism of Beddoes, who had already been mercilessly satirized in the conservative press as a "quack-pneumatic." At the same time, elements of Davy's argument for the value of scientific research—and its links to imagination, beauty, and pleasure—closely track the expansive arguments for the value of poetry Wordsworth had made in his Preface to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, proofs of which Davy had helped correct as it went to press. In his preface,

Wordsworth had contrasted the poet and the “man of science,” assigning the poet the more vital unifying role in a modernity that seemed to be dividing into many separate zones of knowledge and experience; for Davy, science assumes this unifying role. Yet as Davy surely would have noticed, Wordsworth had also imported the language of Davy’s scientific practice in casting his volume as an “experiment” testing the effects of a new kind of poetry on his readers.

# ***From A Discourse Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry***

Chemistry is that part of natural philosophy which relates to those intimate actions of bodies upon each other, by which their appearances are altered, and their individuality destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

This science has for its objects all the substances found upon our globe. It relates not only to the minute alterations in the external world, which are daily coming under the cognizance of our senses, and which in consequence, are incapable of affecting the imagination, but likewise to the great changes, and convulsions in nature, which, occurring but seldom, excite our curiosity, or awaken our astonishment.

The phenomena of combustion, of the solution of different substances in water, of the agencies of fire; the production of rain, hail, and snow, and the conversion of dead matter into living matter by vegetable organs, all belong to chemistry; and, in their various and apparently capricious appearances, can be accurately explained only by an acquaintance with the fundamental and general chemical principles.

Chemistry, considered as a systematic arrangement of facts, is of later origin than most of the other sciences; yet certain of its processes and operations have been always more or less connected with them; and, lately, by furnishing new instruments and powers of investigation, it has greatly contributed to increase their perfection, and to extend their applications.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

[I]t is difficult to examine any of our common operations or labours without finding them more or less connected with chemistry. By means of this science man has employed almost all the

substances in nature either for the satisfaction of his wants or the gratification of his luxuries. Not contented with what is found upon the surface of the earth, he has penetrated into her bosom, and has even searched the bottom of the ocean for the purpose of allaying the restlessness of his desires, or of extending and increasing his power. He is to a certain extent ruler of all the elements that surround him; and he is capable of using not only common matter according to his will and inclinations, but likewise of subjecting to his purposes the ethereal principles of heat and light. By his inventions they are elicited from the atmosphere; and under his control they become, according to circumstances, instruments of comfort and enjoyment, or of terror and destruction.<sup>3</sup>

To be able indeed to form an accurate estimate of the effects of chemical philosophy, and the arts and sciences connected with it, upon the human mind, we ought to examine the history of society, to trace the progress of improvement, or more immediately to compare the uncultivated savage with the being of science and civilization.

Man, in what is called a state of nature, is a creature of almost pure sensation. Called into activity only by positive wants, his life is passed either in satisfying the cravings of the common appetites, or in apathy, or in slumber. Living only in moments he calculates but little on futurity. He has no vivid feelings of hope, or thoughts of permanent and powerful action. And unable to discover causes, he is either harassed by superstitious dreams, or quietly and passively submissive to the mercy of nature and the elements. How different is man informed through the beneficence of the Deity, by science and the arts! Knowing his wants, and being able to provide for them, he is capable of anticipating future enjoyments, and of connecting hope with an infinite variety of ideas. He is in some measure independent of chance or accident for his pleasures. Science has given to him an acquaintance with the different relations of the parts of the external world; and more than that, it has bestowed upon him powers which may be almost called creative; which have enabled him to modify and change the beings surrounding him, and by his

experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments.

\* \* \*

As a branch of sublime philosophy, chemistry is far from being perfect. It consists of a number of collections of facts connected together by different relations; but as yet it is not furnished with a precise and beautiful theory. Though we can perceive, develop, and even produce, by means of our instruments of experiment, an almost infinite variety of minute phænomena, yet we are incapable of determining the general laws by which they are governed; and in attempting to define them, we are lost in obscure, though sublime imaginations concerning unknown agencies. That they may be discovered, however, there is every reason to believe. And who would not be ambitious of becoming acquainted with the most profound secrets of nature, of ascertaining her hidden operations, and of exhibiting to men that system of knowledge which relates so intimately to their own physical and moral constitution?

The future is composed merely of images of the past, connected in new arrangements by analogy, and modified by the circumstances and feelings of the moment; our hopes are founded upon our experience; and in reasoning concerning what may be accomplished, we ought not only to consider the immense field of research yet unexplored, but likewise to examine the latest operations of the human mind, and to ascertain the degree of its strength and activity.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century very little was known concerning the philosophy of the intimate actions of bodies on each other;<sup>4</sup> and before this time, vague ideas, superstitious notions, and inaccurate practices, were the only effects of the first efforts of the mind to establish the foundations of chemistry. Men either were astonished and deluded by their first inventions so as to become visionaries, and to institute researches after imaginary things, or they employed them as instruments for astonishing and deluding others, influenced by their dearest passions and interests,

by ambition, or the love of money. Hence arose the dreams of alchemy concerning the philosopher's stone, and the elixir of life.<sup>5</sup> Hence, for a long while the other metals were destroyed or rendered useless by experiments designed to transmute them into gold; and for a long while the means of obtaining earthly immortality were sought for amidst the unhealthy vapours of the laboratory. These views of things have passed away, and a new science has gradually arisen. The dim and uncertain twilight of discovery, which gave to objects false or indefinite appearances, has been succeeded by the steady light of truth, which has shown the external world in its distinct forms, and in its true relations to human powers. The composition of the atmosphere, and the properties of the gases, have been ascertained; the phænomena of electricity have been developed; the lightnings have been taken from the clouds; and lastly, a new influence has been discovered, which has enabled man to produce from combinations of dead matter effects which were formerly occasioned only by animal organs.<sup>6</sup>

The human mind has been lately active and powerful; but there is very little reason for believing that the period of its greatest strength is passed; or even that it has attained its adult state. We find in all its exertions not only the health and vigour, but likewise the awkwardness of youth. It has gained new powers and faculties; but it is as yet incapable of using them with readiness and efficacy. Its desires are beyond its abilities; its different parts and organs are not firmly knit together, and they seldom act in perfect unity.

Unless any great physical changes should take place upon the globe, the permanency of the arts and sciences is rendered certain, in consequence of the diffusion of knowledge by means of the invention of printing; and those words which are the immutable instruments of thought, are become the constant and widely-diffused nourishment of the mind, the preservers of its health and energy. Individuals, in consequence of interested motives or false views, may check for a time the progress of knowledge; moral causes may produce a momentary slumber of the public spirit; the adoption of wild and dangerous theories, by ambitious or deluded

men, may throw a temporary opprobrium on literature; but the influence of true philosophy will never be despised; the germs of improvement are sown in minds even where they are not perceived, and sooner or later the spring-time of their growth must arrive.

In reasoning concerning the future hopes of the human species, we may look forward with confidence to a state of society in which the different orders and classes of men will contribute more effectually to the support of each other than they have hitherto done. This state indeed seems to be approaching fast; for in consequence of the multiplication of the means of instruction, the man of science and the manufacturer are daily becoming more nearly assimilated to each other. The artist who formerly affected to despise scientific principles, because he was incapable of perceiving the advantages of them, is now so far enlightened, as to favour the adoption of new processes in his art, whenever they are evidently connected with a diminution of labour. And the increase of projectors,<sup>2</sup> even to too great an extent, demonstrates the enthusiasm of the public mind in its search after improvement. The arts and sciences also are in a high degree cultivated, and patronized by the rich and privileged orders. The guardians of civilization and of refinement, the most powerful and respected part of society, are daily growing more attentive to the realities of life; and, giving up many of their unnecessary enjoyments in consequence of the desire to be useful, are becoming the friends and protectors of the labouring part of the community. The unequal division of property and of labour, the difference of rank and condition amongst mankind, are the sources of power in civilized life, its moving causes, and even its very soul; and in considering and hoping that the human species is capable of becoming more enlightened and more happy, we can only expect that the great whole of society should be ultimately connected together by means of knowledge and the useful arts; that they should act as the children of one great parent, with one determinate end, so that no power may be rendered useless, no exertions thrown away. In this view we do not look to distant ages, or amuse ourselves with



brilliant, though delusive dreams concerning the infinite improveability of man, the annihilation of labour, disease, and even death.<sup>8</sup> But we reason by analogy from simple facts. We consider only a state of human progression arising out of its present condition. We look for a time that we may reasonably expect, for a bright day of which we already behold the dawn.

So far our considerations have been general; so far we have examined chemistry chiefly with regard to its great agency upon the improvement of society, as connected with the increasing perfection of the different branches of natural philosophy and the arts. At present it remains for us only to investigate the effects of the study of this science upon particular minds, and to ascertain its powers of increasing that happiness which arises out of the private feelings and interests of individuals.

\* \* \*

The appearances of the greater number of natural objects are originally delightful to us, and they become still more so, when the laws by which they are governed are known, and when they are associated with ideas of order and utility. The study of nature, therefore, in her various operations must be always more or less connected with the love of the beautiful and sublime;<sup>9</sup> and in consequence of the extent and indefiniteness of the views it presents to us, it is eminently calculated to gratify and keep alive the more powerful passions and ambitions of the soul, which, delighting in the anticipation of enjoyment, is never satisfied with knowledge; and which is as it were nourished by futurity, and rendered strong by hope.

In common society, to men collected in great cities, who are wearied by the constant recurrence of similar artificial pursuits and objects, and who are in need of sources of permanent attachment, the cultivation of chemistry and the physical sciences may be eminently beneficial.<sup>1</sup> For in all their applications they exhibit an almost infinite variety of effects connected with a simplicity of

design. They demonstrate that every being is intended for some definite end or purpose. They attach feelings of importance even to inanimate objects; and they furnish to the mind means of obtaining enjoyment unconnected with the labour or misery of others.

To the man of business, or of mechanical employment, the pursuit of experimental research may afford a simple pleasure, unconnected with the gratification of unnecessary wants, and leading to such an expansion of the faculties of the mind as must give to it dignity and power. To the refined and fashionable classes of society it may become a source of consolation and of happiness, in those moments of solitude, when the common habits and passions of the world are considered with indifference. It may destroy diseases of the imagination, owing to too deep a sensibility; and it may attach the affections to objects, permanent, important, and intimately related to the interests of the human species. Even to persons of powerful minds, who are connected with society by literary, political, or moral relations, an acquaintance with the science that represents the operations of nature cannot be wholly useless. It must strengthen their habits of minute discrimination; and by obliging them to use a language representing simple facts, may tend to destroy the influence of terms connected only with feeling. The man who has been accustomed to study natural objects philosophically, to be perpetually guarding against the delusions of the fancy, will not readily be induced to multiply words so as to forget things. From observing in the relations of inanimate things fitness and utility, he will reason with deeper reverence concerning beings possessing life; and perceiving in all the phenomena of the universe the designs of a perfect intelligence, he will be averse to the turbulence and passion of hasty innovations, and will uniformly appear as the friend of tranquillity and order.<sup>2</sup>

1802

## Endnotes

- Note 1: “Natural philosophy” encompassed the study of physics and chemistry.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The work of the great French chemist Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794) in particular had begun transforming chemistry into a newly systematic science in the last decades of the 18th century. Along with more precise laboratory equipment, the “new instruments and powers” Davy mentions include Volta’s battery, which by 1800 had already enabled the English scientist William Nicholson (1753–1815) to decompose water into hydrogen and oxygen.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3:  
Davy’s description of the scientific researcher as penetrating nature’s hiding places follows in the tradition associated with Francis Bacon (1561–1626), a founder of the “new science” in the 17th century. The gendered rhetoric reappears in ironic form in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: Victor Frankenstein’s teacher, M. Waldman, sounds a good deal like Davy when he directs Victor to the study of chemistry, claiming that modern chemists “have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers . . .”—powers which Victor, of course, will take too far.  
[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, how different chemical substances interact to produce reactions.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Alchemists sought the “philosopher’s stone,” a substance that according to legend could turn ordinary metals into silver or gold. Some thought the stone, once discovered, could also be used to create an “elixir of life” that would undo the effects of age.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Davy refers to such advances as Priestley’s and Lavoisier’s work on gases, including the discovery of oxygen; Benjamin Franklin’s famous channeling of lightning with a key on a kite; and the experiments in animal electricity of Luigi Galvani (1737–1798), Volta, and others.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7:

The term *projector* could refer in a neutral sense to anyone launching an enterprise or invention, but was frequently associated with quacks, cons, or those taken with “wild impracticable schemes,” as Samuel Johnson explained in his *Dictionary* (1755). Jonathan Swift’s 1726 satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (part 3, chap. 5) hilariously depicts an academy full of delusive “projectors” wasting away their years on absurd schemes and useless or unworkable inventions.

[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Among other targets, the dig at “delusive dreams” seems aimed at Davy’s former employer Beddoes, as well as at radical philosopher William Godwin’s theory of “perfectibility” and his speculation that humans might one day, through advances in knowledge, attain immortality.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Key categories of 18th-century aesthetic theory, as in Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Compare Wordsworth’s complaint in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* about the desensitizing effects of routinized life in crowded cities (see p. 341 in this volume).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Critics of the French Revolution dismissively labeled it a dangerous “innovation.”[Return to reference 2](#)

# MARY SOMERVILLE

Born and raised in Scotland, Mary Somerville (1780–1872) developed a passion for mathematics at a young age, somewhat to the alarm of her traditionalist family, and later to the chagrin of her first husband, a distant relative and officer in the Russian navy. With her second husband, the physician William Somerville, who shared and encouraged her scientific interests, she developed a social network that included many prominent scientists and writers, among them the novelist Maria Edgeworth and the poet and playwright Joanna Baillie. Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* (1834) presented a synoptic view of the state of the art of contemporary astronomy and physics, designed to reach a varied audience in direct, lucid prose while sacrificing neither rigor nor elegance. Quickly acknowledged as a classic, it went through nine editions in Somerville's lifetime, each updated to keep pace with emerging knowledge. Baillie told Somerville that her achievement in *On the Connexion* "has done more to remove the light estimation in which the capacity of women is too often held, than all that has been accomplished by the whole sisterhood of poetical damsels and novel-writing authors."

Somerville's book is often noted as providing the occasion for the first appearance of the word *scientist* in print, in a glowing *Quarterly Magazine* review by Cambridge professor William Whewell. As the historian James Secord points out, though, Whewell had come up with the term (partly at Coleridge's suggestion), "on analogy with tobacconist," to denote the supposedly narrower sphere of a "mere" practitioner, in contrast to the supposedly more general, theoretical perspective of the scientific philosopher; Whewell in fact compliments Somerville by including her in this latter, more prestigious category, as *more* than a scientist. As Secord observes, Whewell's gender-bound reasoning further identifies her clarity of style and capacity for synthesis as advantages of her possessing a

“woman’s mind,” rising serenely above the worldly affairs with which men were supposedly concerned.

# ***From On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences***

\* \* \*

In tracing the connection of the physical sciences, astronomy affords the most extensive example of their union. In it are combined the sciences of number and quantity, of rest and motion. In it we perceive the operation of a force which is mixed up with every thing that exists in the heavens or on earth; which pervades every atom, rules the motions of animate and inanimate beings, and is as sensible in the descent of a rain drop as in the falls of Niagara, in the weight of the air as in the periods of the moon. Gravitation not only binds satellites to their planet, and planets to the sun, but it connects sun with sun throughout the wide extent of creation, and is the cause of the disturbances, as well as of the order, of nature: since every tremour it excites in any one planet is immediately transmitted to the farthest limits of the system, in oscillations, which correspond in their periods with the cause producing them, like sympathetic notes in music, or vibrations from the deep tones of an organ.

The heavens afford the most sublime subject of study which can be derived from science. The magnitude and splendour of the objects, the inconceivable rapidity with which they move, and the enormous distances between them, impress the mind with some notion of the energy that maintains them in their motions, with a durability to which we can see no limit. Equally conspicuous is the goodness of the great First Cause, in having endowed man with faculties, by which he can not only appreciate the magnificence of his works, but trace, with precision, the operation of his laws, use the globe he inhabits as a base wherewith to measure the magnitude and distance of the sun and planets, and make the

diameter of the earth's orbit the first step of a scale by which he may ascend to the starry firmament. Such pursuits, while they ennoble the mind, at the same time inculcate humility, by showing that there is a barrier which no energy, mental or physical, can ever enable us to pass: that, however profoundly we may penetrate the depths of space, there still remain innumerable systems, compared with which, those apparently so vast must dwindle into insignificance, or even become invisible; and that not only man, but the globe he inhabits,—nay, the whole system of which it forms so small a part,—might be annihilated, and its extinction be unperceived in the immensity of creation.

It must be acknowledged, that a complete acquaintance with physical astronomy can be attained by those only, who are well versed in the higher branches of mathematical and mechanical science, and that they alone can appreciate the extreme beauty of the results, and of the means by which these results are obtained. It is nevertheless true, that a sufficient skill in analysis to follow the general outline,—to see the mutual dependence of the different parts of the system, and to comprehend by what means some of the most extraordinary conclusions have been arrived at,—is within the reach of many who shrink from the task, appalled by difficulties, which, perhaps, are not more formidable than those incident to the study of the elements of every branch of knowledge. There is a wide distinction between the degree of mathematical acquirement necessary for making discoveries, and that which is requisite for understanding what others have done.

\* \* \*

1834, 1835



## **CHARLOTTE SMITH**

### **1749–1806**

The melancholy of Charlotte Smith's poems was no mere literary posture. After her father married for the second time, she herself was married off, at the age of fifteen, and bore a dozen children (three of whom died in infancy or childhood), before permanently separating from her husband, Benjamin Smith, because of his abusive temper, infidelities, and financial irresponsibility. She began writing to make money when her husband was imprisoned for debt in 1783. Her first book, *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Essays by Charlotte Smith of Bignor Park, Sussex*, came out in 1784 and went through nine expanding editions in the following sixteen years.



Frontispiece to the 1788 edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*, showing the "Queen of the Silver Bowl."

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Beginning with the 1788 publication of *Emmeline*, Smith also enjoyed considerable success as a novelist, rapidly producing nine more novels within the decade, including *Desmond* (1792), *The Old Manor House* (1793), *The Banished Man* (1794), and *The Young Philosopher* (1798). She also wrote books for children and, once, for the stage. The liberal political views espoused in her novels made the books key contributions to the Revolution Controversy in Britain. This was also the case with her eight-hundred-line blank verse poem *The Emigrants* (1793), which both evokes the suffering endured by political refugees from France and links their plight to that of the poet herself, who as a woman has discovered the emptiness of her native land's "boast / Of equal law." Such views earned Smith a place of dishonor, alongside Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Letitia Barbauld, in Richard Polwhele's conservative satire *The Unsex'd Females* (1797), which scolds her for having suffered "her mind to be infected with the Gallic mania."

The sonnet as a form, after its great flourishing in the Renaissance in the hands of Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton, dropped out of fashion in the eighteenth century. It was, Samuel Johnson declared in his *Dictionary* (1755), "not very suitable to the English language." Its revival toward the end of that century—by Coleridge in the 1790s; Wordsworth (who wrote some five hundred sonnets beginning in 1802); and in the next generation, Shelley and Keats—was largely the result of Smith's influential refashioning of the sonnet as a medium of mournful feeling. In the introduction to his privately printed "sheet of sonnets" in 1796, Coleridge noted that "Charlotte Smith and [William Lisle] Bowles are they who first made the Sonnet popular among the present English," but in fact, in his *Fourteen Sonnets* of 1789 Bowles was simply following in Smith's footsteps.

In that commentary on the sonnet Coleridge made Smith his principal example when he remarked that "those Sonnets appear to



me the most exquisite, in which moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings, are deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of Nature." Subsequently, of course, the connecting of feelings and nature became recognized as a central theme and strategy in Romantic literature, especially in the lyric poetry we associate with Coleridge and Wordsworth. But Smith's engagement with nature differs in illuminating ways from theirs. This is in part because of its quasi-scientific insistence on the faithful rendering of detail (one of Smith's sonnets is addressed to the "goddess of botany") and because of the otherness and multitudinousness in the natural world which that detail discloses. This carefully realized close-up view of nature is central to her masterpiece, the posthumously published *Beachy Head* (1807), where it gets combined, to startling effect, with a sense of the vast—immense vistas of geological time, for instance, or the distances covered by ships voyaging between Britain and her Asian colonies. Named for the headland forming the southernmost point in Sussex, the likely beachhead for the French invasion that early nineteenth-century English people anticipated fearfully, *Beachy Head* brings together personal memories, natural history, and national history in a mix that is without parallel in the period.

***FROM* ELEGIAC SONNETS**

## Written at the Close of Spring

The garlands fade that Spring so lately wove,  
Each simple flower, which she had nursed in dew,  
Anemonies,<sup>1</sup> that spangled every grove,  
The primrose wan, and hare-bell mildly blue.  
No more shall violets linger in the dell,  
5 Or purple orchis variegate the plain,  
Till Spring again shall call forth every bell,  
And dress with humid hands her wreaths again.—  
Ah! poor humanity! so frail, so fair,  
Are the fond visions of thy early day,  
10 Till tyrant passion, and corrosive care,  
Bid all thy fairy colors fade away!  
Another May new buds and flowers shall bring;  
Ah! why has happiness—no second Spring?

1784

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Anemonies. *Anemony Nemeroso*. The wood Anemony [Smith's note]. [Return to reference 1](#)

# To Sleep

Come, balmy Sleep! tired nature's soft resort!  
On these sad temples all thy poppies shed;  
And bid gay dreams, from Morpheus'<sup>1</sup> airy court,  
Float in light vision round my aching head!  
Secure of all thy blessings, partial<sup>2</sup> Power!  
5 On his hard bed the peasant throws him down;  
And the poor sea boy, in the rudest hour,  
Enjoys thee more than he who wears a crown.<sup>3</sup>  
Clasp'd in her faithful shepherd's guardian arms,  
Well may the village girl sweet slumbers prove  
10 And they, O gentle Sleep! still taste thy charms,  
Who wake to labor, liberty, and love.  
But still thy opiate aid dost thou deny  
To calm the anxious breast; to close the streaming  
eye.

1784

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Greek god of dreams.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Friendly, but also biased.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast / seal up the ship boy's eyes, and rock his brains / In cradle of the rude impetuous surge? Shakespeare's *Henry IV* [*Smith's note*]. It was "imperious surge" in the original.[Return to reference 3](#)

# To the North Star<sup>1</sup>

(Supposed to Be Written by Werter)

To thy bright beams I turn my swimming eyes,<sup>2</sup>  
Fair, fav'rite planet! which in happier days  
Saw my young hopes, ah! faithless hopes!—arise;  
And on my passion shed propitious rays!  
Now nightly wandering mid the tempests drear  
That howl the woods, and rocky steeps among,  
I love to see thy sudden light appear  
Thro' the swift clouds—driv'n by the wind along:  
Or in the turbid water, rude and dark,  
O'er whose wild stream the gust of Winter raves,  
Thy trembling light with pleasure still I mark,  
Gleam in faint radiance on the foaming waves!  
So o'er my soul short rays of reason fly,  
Then fade:—and leave me, to despair and die!  
1786, 1789

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This and the following sonnet were placed third and fifth, respectively, in a sequence of five sonnets Smith identified as “supposed to be written by Werter.” *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel featuring a suicidally love-sick hero, was a pan-European phenomenon.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: “The greater Bear, favourite of all of the constellations; for when I left you of an evening, it used to shine opposite your window.” *Sorrows of Werter. Volume Second* [Smith’s note]. Ursa Major, commonly known as the Big Dipper, is oriented near



(but does not in fact include) the North Star.[Return to reference](#)  
[2](#)

# By the Same

(Just before his death)

Why should I wish to hold in this low sphere<sup>1</sup>  
    'A frail and feverish being?'<sup>2</sup> Wherefore try  
    Poorly from day to day to linger here,  
    Against the powerful hand of destiny?  
By those who know the force of hopeless care,  
5     On the worn heart—I sure shall be forgiven,  
    If to elude dark guilt, and dire despair,  
    I go uncall'd—to mercy and to Heaven!  
Oh thou! to save whose peace I now depart,  
    Will thy soft mind, thy poor lost friend deplore,  
10     When worms shall feed on this devoted heart,<sup>3</sup>  
    Where even thy image shall be found no more?  
Yet may thy pity mingle not with pain,  
For then thy hapless lover—dies in vain!  
1786, 1789

## Endnotes

- Note 1: "May my death remove every obstacle to your happiness. Be at peace, I intreat you be at peace." *Sorrows of Werter. Volume Second* [Smith's note]. The speaker opposes the "low sphere" of earth to a heavenly higher sphere.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Milton, *Comus* 1.8.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Smith's note cites as inspiration for this line Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Eloise* (1761), like *The Sorrows of Young Werther* a foundational epistolary novel of sensibility.[Return to reference 3](#)

## To Night<sup>1</sup>

I love thee, mournful, sober-suited Night!  
When the faint moon, yet lingering in her wane,  
And veil'd in clouds, with pale uncertain light  
Hangs o'er the waters of the restless main.  
5 In deep depression sunk, the enfeebled mind  
Will to the deaf cold elements complain,  
And tell the embosom'd grief, however vain,  
To sullen surges and the viewless wind.  
Though no repose on thy dark breast I find,  
10 I still enjoy thee—cheerless as thou art;  
For in thy quiet gloom the exhausted heart  
Is calm, though wretched; hopeless, yet resign'd.  
While to the winds and waves its sorrows given,  
May reach—though lost on earth—the ear of  
Heaven!

1788

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This sonnet is one of several of those included in the *Elegiac Sonnets* to have appeared initially in one of Smith's novels—in this case, *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle* (1788), where, speaking in a "low, but extremely expressive voice," the novel's romantic hero, Godolphin, recites these lines, "addressed to Night," on the deck of a boat making a nighttime crossing of the English Channel. [Return to reference 1](#)

# Written in the Church-Yard at Middleton in Sussex<sup>1</sup>

Press'd by the Moon, mute arbitress of tides,  
While the loud equinox its power combines,  
The sea no more its swelling surge confines,  
But o'er the shrinking land sublimely rides.  
5 The wild blast, rising from the Western cave,  
Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed;  
Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead,  
And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave!  
With shells and sea-weed mingled, on the shore  
10 Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave;  
But vain to them the winds and waters rave;  
*They* hear the warring elements no more:  
While I am doom'd—by life's long storm oppress,  
To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest.

1789

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Middleton is a village on the margin of the sea, in Sussex, containing only two or three houses. There were formerly several acres of ground between its small church and the sea, which now, by its continual encroachments, approaches within a few feet of this half ruined and humble edifice. The wall, which once surrounded the churchyard, is entirely swept away, many of the graves broken up, and the remains of bodies interred washed into the sea: whence human bones are found among the sand and shingles on the shore [*Smith's note*].

[Return to reference 1](#)

## To Fancy

Thee, Queen of Shadows!—shall I still invoke,  
Still love the scenes thy sportive pencil drew,  
When on mine eyes the early radiance broke  
Which shew'd the beauteous, rather than the true!  
5 Alas! long since, those glowing tints are dead,  
And now 'tis thine in darkest hues to dress<sup>1</sup>  
The spot where pale Experience hangs her head  
O'er the sad grave of murder'd Happiness!  
Thro' thy false medium then, no longer view'd,  
10 May fancy'd pain and fancy'd pleasure fly,  
And I, as from me all thy dreams depart,  
Be to my wayward destiny subdu'd;  
Nor seek perfection with a poet's eye,  
Nor suffer anguish with a poet's heart!

1789

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Make ready, prepare.[Return to reference 1](#)

# On Being Cautioned against Walking on an Headland Overlooking the Sea, Because It Was Frequented by a Lunatic

Is there a solitary wretch who hies  
To the tall cliff, with starting pace or slow,  
And, measuring, views with wild and hollow eyes  
Its distance from the waves that chide below;  
5 Who, as the sea-born gale with frequent sighs  
Chills his cold bed upon the mountain turf,  
With hoarse, half-utter'd lamentation, lies  
Murmuring responses to the dashing surf?  
In moody sadness, on the giddy brink,  
10 I see him more with envy than with fear;  
*He* has no *nice felicities* that shrink<sup>1</sup>  
From giant horrors; wildly wandering here,  
He seems (uncursed with reason) not to know  
The depth or the duration of his woe.

1797

## Endnotes

- Note 1: " 'Tis delicate felicity that shrinks / when rocking winds are loud." Walpole [*Smith's note*]. Smith is citing Horace Walpole's 1768 tragedy *The Mysterious Mother* I.70.[Return to reference 1](#)

# To the Insect of the Gossamer<sup>1</sup>

Small, viewless Aeronaut,<sup>2</sup> that by the line  
Of Gossamer suspended, in mid air  
Float'st on a sun beam—Living Atom, where  
Ends thy breeze-guided voyage;—with what design  
5 In Aether<sup>3</sup> dost thou launch thy form minute,  
Mocking the eye?—Alas! before the veil  
Of denser clouds shall hide thee, the pursuit  
Of the keen Swift<sup>4</sup> may end thy fairy sail!—  
Thus on the golden thread that Fancy weaves  
10 Buoyant, as Hope's illusive<sup>5</sup> flattery breathes,  
The young and visionary Poet leaves  
Life's dull realities, while sevenfold wreaths  
Of rainbow-light around his head revolve.  
Ah! soon at Sorrow's touch the radiant dreams  
dissolve!

1797

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

A long endnote accompanied this sonnet in *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Poems*: "The almost imperceptible threads floating in the air, towards the end of Summer or Autumn, in a still evening, sometimes are so numerous as to be felt on the face and hand. It is on these that a minute species of spider convey themselves from place to place; sometimes rising with the wind to a great height in the air." Smith continues by quoting descriptions of the phenomenon from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the scientist-poet Erasmus Darwin's *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791). (For more on Darwin, see above, pp. 65–68.) She then turns to

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where Mercutio imagines the [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: *Aeronaut* can designate both a human balloonist, who floats through the air, and the kind of spider that does the same. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Air. The term was still sometimes used to designate the regions of space above the clouds or the refined, pure atmosphere breathed in heaven. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An insect-eating bird. [Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *illusory* [Return to reference °](#)



# The Sea View<sup>1</sup>

The upland shepherd, as reclined he lies  
On the soft turf that clothes the mountain brow,  
Marks the bright sea-line mingling with the skies;  
Or from his course celestial, sinking slow,  
The summer-sun in purple radiance low,  
5 Blaze on the western waters; the wide scene  
Magnificent, and tranquil, seems to spread  
Even o'er the rustic's breast a joy serene,  
When, like dark plague-spots by the Demons shed,  
10 Charged deep with death, upon the waves, far seen,  
Move the war-freighted ships; and fierce and red,  
Flash their destructive fire.—The mangled dead  
And dying victims then pollute the flood.  
Ah! thus man spoils Heaven's glorious works with  
blood!

1797

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Suggested by the recollection of having seen, some years since, on a beautiful evening of Summer, an engagement between two armed ships, from the high down called the Beacon Hill, near Brighthelmstone [*Smith's note*]. Smith is referring to a location near Brighton.[Return to reference 1](#)

# The Swallow<sup>1</sup>

The gorse<sup>2</sup> is yellow on the heath,  
The banks with speed well<sup>3</sup> flowers are gay,  
The oaks are budding; and beneath,  
The hawthorn soon will bear the wreath,  
The silver wreath of May.

5

The welcome guest of settled Spring,  
The Swallow too is come at last;  
Just at sun-set, when thrushes sing,  
I saw her dash with rapid wing,  
And hail'd her as she pass'd.

10

Come, summer visitant, attach  
To my reed<sup>o</sup> roof your nest of clay,  
And let my ear your music catch  
Low twittering underneath the thatch  
At the gray dawn of day.

15

As fables tell, an Indian Sage,<sup>4</sup>  
The Hindostani woods among,  
Could in his desert hermitage,  
As if 'twere mark'd in written page,  
Translate the wild bird's song,

20

I wish I did his power possess,  
That I might learn, fleet bird, from thee,  
What our vain systems only guess,  
And know from what wide wilderness  
You came across the sea.

25

I would a little while restrain

30           Your rapid wing, that I might hear  
Whether on clouds that bring the rain,  
You sail'd above the western main,  
          The wind your charioteer.

          In Afric, does the sultry gale  
          Thro' spicy bower, and palmy grove,  
Bear the repeated Cuckoo's tale?  
Dwells *there* a time, the wandering Rail  
35           Or the itinerant Dove?<sup>5</sup>

          Were you in Asia? O relate,  
          If there your fabled sister's woes  
She seem'd in sorrow to narrate;  
Or sings she but to celebrate  
40           Her nuptials with the rose?<sup>6</sup>

          I would enquire how journeying long,  
          The vast and pathless ocean o'er,  
You ply again those pinions strong,  
And come to build anew among<sup>7</sup>  
45           The scenes you left before;

          But if, as colder breezes blow,  
          Prophetic of the waning year,  
You hide, tho' none know when or how,  
In the cliff's excavated brow,<sup>8</sup>  
50           And linger torpid here;

          Thus lost to life, what favouring dream  
          Bids you to happier hours awake;  
And tells, that dancing in the beam,  
The light gnat hovers o'er the stream,  
55           The May-fly on the lake?

          Or if, by instinct taught to know

Approaching dearth of insect food;  
To isles and willowy aits<sup>o</sup> you go,<sup>9</sup>  
And crouding on the pliant bough,  
Sink in the dimpling flood:  
60  
How learn ye, while the cold waves boom  
Your deep and ouxy couch above,  
The time when flowers of promise bloom,  
And call you from your transient tomb,  
65  
To light, and life, and love?  
Alas! how little can be known,  
Her sacred veil where Nature draws;  
Let baffled Science humbly own,  
Her mysteries understood alone,  
70  
By *Him* who gives her laws.

1807

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This poem appeared posthumously in 1807 both in the last of Smith's books for children, the ornithological handbook *The History of Birds*, and in her *Beachy Head, Fables, and Other Poems*, the source of the text used here.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Gorse-Furze.—*Ulex Europæus*. Called so in many counties of England [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: *Veronica chamœdrys*.—This elegant flower, though not celebrated like the Primrose, Cowslip, and Daisy, is in all its varieties one of the most beautiful of our indigenous plants [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: There are two or three fables that relate the knowledge acquired by some Indian recluse, of the language of birds [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Cuckoo, the Rail, and many species of Doves, are all emigrants [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6:  
Alluding to the Ovidian fable of the Metamorphosis of Procne and Philomela into the Swallow and the Nightingale; and to the oriental story of the Loves of the Nightingale and the Rose; which is told with much elegant extravagance in the Botanic Garden [*Smith's note*]. Smith's reference to Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), later included in his 1791 *Botanic Garden*, may be to a long footnote to canto 1, line 320, or to canto 4, lines 309–20. She couples Darwin's book with the fable of rape and female revenge found in book 6 of the classical Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For more on Darwin, see pp. 65–68, above.  
[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7:  
Accurate observers have remarked, that an equal number of these birds return every year to build in the places they frequented before; and that each pair set immediately about repairing a particular nest [*Smith's note*]. Although swallows' return to their nests is a well-known sign of spring, 18th- and early-19th-century scientists were mystified by where the birds might be during their absence. The matter was debated vigorously by figures such as Gilbert White, author in 1789 of *The Natural History of Selborne*, which Smith mentions in her note to line 58 (see pp. 62–65, above). Some debaters opted for migration, and others, hibernation, the "torpid state" Smith  
[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Many persons have supported the idea, that the Hirundines linger concealed among rocks and hollows in a torpid state, and that all do not emigrate [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Another opinion is, that the Swallows, at the time they disappear, assemble about rivers and ponds, and a number of them settling on the pliant boughs of willow and osier, sink by their weight into the water; at the bottom of which they remain torpid till the ensuing spring. For the foundation of these various

theories, see “White’s History of Selbourne” [*Smith’s note*]. [Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *thatched* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *small islands* [Return to reference °](#)

## Beachy Head<sup>1</sup>

On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime!  
That o'er the channel rear'd, half way at sea  
The mariner at early morning hails,<sup>2</sup>  
I would recline; while Fancy should go forth,  
And represent the strange and awful hour  
5 Of vast concussion;<sup>3</sup> when the Omnipotent  
Stretch'd forth his arm, and rent the solid hills,  
Bidding the impetuous main flood rush between  
The rifted shores, and from the continent  
Eternally divided this green isle.  
10 Imperial lord of the high southern coast!  
From thy projecting head-land I would mark  
Far in the east the shades of night disperse,  
Melting and thinned, as from the dark blue wave  
Emerging, brilliant rays of arrowy light<sup>o</sup>  
15 Dart from the horizon; when the glorious sun  
Just lifts above it his resplendent orb.  
Advances now, with feathery silver touched,  
The rippling tide of flood; glisten the sands,  
While, inmates of the chalky clefts that scar  
20 Thy sides precipitous, with shrill harsh cry,  
Their white wings glancing in the level beam,  
The terns, and gulls, and tarrocks, seek their food,<sup>4</sup>  
And thy rough hollows echo to the voice  
Of the gray choughs,<sup>5</sup> and ever restless daws,  
25 With clamour, not unlike the chiding hounds,  
While the lone shepherd, and his baying dog,  
Drive to thy turfy crest his bleating flock.

The high meridian<sup>o</sup> of the day is past,

30 And Ocean now, reflecting the calm Heaven,  
Is of cerulean hue; and murmurs low  
The tide of ebb, upon the level sands.  
The sloop, her angular canvas shifting still,  
Catches the light and variable airs  
35 That but a little crisp the summer sea,  
Dimpling its tranquil surface.

Afar off,  
And just emerging from the arch immense  
Where seem to part the elements, a fleet  
Of fishing vessels stretch their lesser sails;  
While more remote, and like a dubious spot  
40 Just hanging in the horizon, laden deep,  
The ship of commerce richly freighted, makes  
Her slower progress, on her distant voyage,  
Bound to the orient climates, where the sun  
Matures the spice within its odorous shell,  
45 And, rivalling the gray worm's filmy toil,<sup>6</sup>  
Bursts from its pod the vegetable down;<sup>7</sup>  
Which in long turban'd wreaths, from torrid heat  
Defends the brows of Asia's countless castes.  
There the Earth hides within her glowing breast  
50 The beamy adamant,<sup>8</sup> and the round pearl  
Enchased<sup>9</sup> in rugged covering; which the slave,  
With perilous and breathless toil, tears off  
From the rough sea-rock, deep beneath the waves.  
These are the toys of Nature; and her sport  
55 Of little estimate in Reason's eye:  
And they who reason, with abhorrence see  
Man, for such gaudes and baubles, violate  
The sacred freedom of his fellow man—  
Erroneous estimate! As Heaven's pure air,  
60 Fresh as it blows on this aërial height,  
Or sound of seas upon the stony strand,



Or inland, the gay harmony of birds,  
And winds that wander in the leafy woods;  
Are to the unadulterate taste more worth  
65 Than the elaborate harmony, brought out  
From fretted stop<sup>o</sup> or modulated airs  
Of vocal science.—So the brightest gems,  
Glancing resplendent on the regal crown,  
Or trembling in the high born beauty's ear,  
70 Are poor and paltry, to the lovely light  
Of the fair star,<sup>o</sup> that as the day declines  
Attendent on her queen, the crescent moon,  
Bathes her bright tresses in the eastern wave.  
For now the sun is verging to the sea,  
75 And as he westward sinks, the floating clouds  
Suspended, move upon the evening gale,  
And gathering round his orb, as if to shade  
The insufferable brightness, they resign  
Their gauzy whiteness; and more warm'd, assume  
80 All hues of purple. There, transparent gold  
Mingles with ruby tints, and sapphire gleams,  
And colours, such as Nature through her works  
Shews only in the ethereal canopy.  
Thither aspiring Fancy fondly soars,  
85 Wandering sublime thro' visionary vales,  
Where bright pavilions rise, and trophies, fann'd  
By airs celestial; and adorn'd with wreaths  
Of flowers that bloom amid elysian bowers.  
Now bright, and brighter still the colours glow,  
90 Till half the lustrous orb within the flood  
Seems to retire: the flood reflecting still  
Its splendor, and in mimic glory drest;  
Till the last ray shot upward, fires the clouds  
With blazing crimson; then in paler light,  
95 Long lines of tenderer radiance, lingering yield  
To partial darkness; and on the opposing side  
The early moon distinctly rising, throws

Her pearly brilliance on the trembling tide.

100 The fishermen, who at set seasons pass  
Many a league off at sea their toiling night,  
Now hail their comrades, from their daily task  
Returning; and make ready for their own,  
With the night tide commencing:—The night tide  
105 Bears a dark vessel on, whose hull and sails  
Mark her a coaster<sup>9</sup> from the north. Her keel  
Now ploughs the sand; and sidelong now she leans,  
While with loud clamours her athletic crew  
Unload her; and resounds the busy hum  
110 Along the wave-worn rocks. Yet more remote  
Where the rough cliff hangs beetling<sup>0</sup> o'er its base,  
All breathes repose; the water's rippling sound  
Scarce heard; but now and then the sea-snipe's<sup>1</sup> cry  
Just tells that something living is abroad;  
And sometimes crossing on the moonbright line,  
115 Glimmers the skiff, faintly discern'd awhile,  
Then lost in shadow.

Contemplation here,  
High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,  
And bid recording Memory unfold  
Her scroll voluminous—bid her retrace  
120 The period, when from Neustria's hostile shore<sup>0</sup>  
The Norman launch'd his galleys, and the bay  
O'er which that mass of ruin<sup>2</sup> frowns even now  
In vain and sullen menace, then received  
The new invaders; a proud martial race,  
125 Of Scandinavia<sup>3</sup> the undaunted sons,  
Whom Dogon, Fier-a-bras, and Humfroi led  
To conquest: while Trinacria to their power  
Yielded her wheaten garland; and when thou,

130 Parthenope! within thy fertile bay  
Receiv'd the victors—

In the mailed ranks  
Of Normans landing on the British coast  
Rode Taillefer; and with astounding voice  
Thunder'd the war song daring Roland sang  
First in the fierce contention: vainly brave,  
135 One not inglorious struggle England made—  
But failing, saw the Saxon heptarchy<sup>4</sup>  
Finish for ever.—Then the holy pile,<sup>5</sup>  
Yet seen upon the field of conquest, rose,  
Where to appease heaven's wrath for so much  
140 blood,  
The conqueror bade unceasing prayers ascend,  
And requiems for the slayers and the slain.  
But let not modern Gallia<sup>o</sup> form from hence  
Presumptuous hopes, that ever thou again,  
Queen of the isles! shalt crouch to foreign arms.  
145 The enervate sons of Italy may yield;  
And the Iberian, all his trophies torn  
And wrapp'd in Superstition's monkish weed,  
May shelter his abasement, and put on  
Degrading fetters. Never, never thou!  
150 Imperial mistress of the obedient sea;  
But thou, in thy integrity secure,  
Shalt now undaunted meet a world in arms.

England! 'twas where this promontory rears  
Its rugged brow above the channel wave,  
155 Parting the hostile nations, that thy fame,  
Thy naval fame was tarnish'd, at what time  
Thou, leagued with the Batavian,<sup>o</sup> gavest to France<sup>6</sup>  
One day of triumph—triumph the more loud,  
Because even then so rare. Oh! well redeem'd,  
Since, by a series of illustrious men,

160 Such as no other country ever rear'd,  
To vindicate her cause. It is a list  
Which, as Fame echoes it, blanches the cheek  
165 Of bold Ambition; while the despot feels  
The extorted sceptre tremble in his grasp.

From even the proudest roll<sup>o</sup> by glory fill'd,  
How gladly the reflecting mind returns  
To simple scenes of peace and industry,  
170 Where, bosom'd in some valley of the hills  
Stands the lone farm; its gate with tawny ricks<sup>o</sup>  
Surrounded, and with granaries and sheds,  
Roof'd with green mosses, and by elms and ash  
Partially shaded; and not far remov'd  
175 The hut of sea-flints built; the humble home  
Of one, who sometimes watches on the heights,<sup>z</sup>  
When hid in the cold mist of passing clouds,  
The flock, with dripping fleeces, are dispers'd  
O'er the wide down; then from some ridged point  
That overlooks the sea, his eager eye  
180 Watches the bark that for his signal waits  
To land its merchandize:—Quitting for this  
Clandestine traffic his more honest toil,  
The crook abandoning, he braves himself  
The heaviest snow-storm of December's night,  
185 When with conflicting winds the ocean raves,  
And on the tossing boat, unfearing mounts  
To meet the partners of the perilous trade,  
And share their hazard. Well it were for him,  
If no such commerce of destruction known,  
190 He were content with what the earth affords  
To human labour; even where she seems  
Reluctant most. More happy is the hind,<sup>o</sup>  
Who, with his own hands rears on some black moor,  
Or turbary,<sup>o</sup> his independent hut  
Cover'd with heather, whence the slow white smoke

195 Of smouldering peat arises—A few sheep,  
His best possession, with his children share  
The rugged shed when wintry tempests blow;  
200 But, when with Spring's return the green blades rise  
Amid the russet heath, the household live  
Joint tenants of the waste<sup>o</sup> throughout the day,  
And often, from her nest, among the swamps,  
Where the gemm'd sun-dew grows, or fring'd buck-  
bean,<sup>8</sup>  
205 They scare the plover,<sup>9</sup> that with plaintive cries  
Flutters, as<sup>o</sup> sorely wounded, down the wind.  
Rude, and but just remov'd from savage life  
Is the rough dweller among scenes like these,  
(Scenes all unlike the poet's fabling dreams  
210 Describing Arcady<sup>1</sup>)—But he is free;  
The dread that follows on illegal acts  
He never feels; and his industrious mate  
Shares in his labour. Where the brook is traced  
By crowding osiers,<sup>o</sup> and the black coot<sup>2</sup> hides  
215 Among the plashy reeds, her diving brood,  
The matron wades; gathering the long green rush<sup>3</sup>  
That well prepar'd hereafter lends its light  
To her poor cottage, dark and cheerless else  
Thro' the drear hours of Winter. Otherwhile  
She leads her infant group where charlock<sup>o</sup> grows  
220 "Unprofitably gay,"<sup>4</sup> or to the fields,  
Where congregate the linnet and the finch,  
That on the thistles, so profusely spread,  
Feast in the desert; the poor family  
Early resort, extirpating with care  
225 These, and the gaudier mischief of the ground;  
Then flames the high rais'd heap; seen afar off  
Like hostile war-fires flashing to the sky.<sup>5</sup>  
Another task is theirs: On fields that shew  
As<sup>o</sup> angry Heaven had rain'd sterility,

230 Stony and cold, and hostile to the plough,  
Where clamouring loud, the evening curlew<sup>6</sup> runs  
And drops her spotted eggs among the flints;  
The mother and the children pile the stones  
In rugged pyramids;—and all this toil  
235 They patiently encounter; well content  
On their flock bed<sup>7</sup> to slumber undisturb'd  
Beneath the smoky roof they call their own.  
Oh! little knows the sturdy hind, who stands  
Gazing, with looks where envy and contempt  
240 Are often strangely mingled, on the car<sup>8</sup>  
Where prosperous Fortune sits; what secret care  
Or sick satiety is often hid,  
Beneath the splendid outside: *He* knows not  
How frequently the child of Luxury  
245 Enjoying nothing, flies from place to place  
In chase of pleasure that eludes his grasp;  
And that content is e'en less found by him,  
Than by the labourer, whose pick-axe smooths  
The road before his chariot; and who doffs  
250 What *was* an hat; and as the train pass on,  
Thinks how one day's expenditure, like this,  
Would cheer him for long months, when to his toil  
The frozen earth closes her marble breast.  
Ah! who *is* happy? Happiness! a word  
255 That like false fire,<sup>9</sup> from marsh effluvia born,  
Misleads the wanderer, destin'd to contend  
In the world's wilderness, with want or woe—  
Yet *they* are happy, who have never ask'd  
What good or evil means. The boy  
260 That on the river's margin gaily plays,  
Has heard that Death is there.—He knows not Death,  
And therefore fears it not; and venturing in  
He gains a bullrush, or a minnow—then,  
At certain peril, for a worthless prize,

265 A crow's, or raven's nest, he climbs the boll<sup>o</sup>  
Of some tall pine; and of his prowess proud,  
Is for a moment happy. Are *your* cares,  
Ye who despise him, never worse applied?  
The village girl is happy, who sets forth  
270 To distant fair, gay in her Sunday suit,  
With cherry colour'd knots, and flourish'd shawl,  
And bonnet newly purchas'd. So is he  
Her little brother, who his mimic drum  
Beats, till he drowns her rural lovers' oaths  
275 Of constant faith, and still increasing love;  
Ah! yet a while, and half those oaths believ'd,  
Her happiness is vanish'd; and the boy  
While yet a stripling, finds the sound he lov'd  
Has led him on, till he has given up  
280 His freedom, and his happiness together.  
*I* once was happy, when while yet a child,  
I learn'd to love these upland solitudes,  
And, when elastic as the mountain air,  
To my light spirit, care was yet unknown  
285 And evil unforeseen:—Early it came,  
And childhood scarcely passed, I was condemned,  
A guiltless exile, silently to sigh,  
While Memory, with faithful pencil, drew  
The contrast; and regretting, I compar'd  
290 With the polluted smoky atmosphere  
And dark and stifling streets, the southern hills  
That to the setting Sun, their graceful heads  
Rearing, o'erlook the frith,<sup>o</sup> where Vecta<sup>8</sup> breaks  
With her white rocks, the strong impetuous tide,  
295 When western winds the vast Atlantic urge  
To thunder on the coast.—Haunts of my youth!  
Scenes of fond day dreams, I behold ye yet!  
Where 'twas so pleasant by thy northern slopes  
To climb the winding sheep-path, aided oft

300 By scatter'd thorns: whose spiny branches bore  
Small woolly tufts, spoils of the vagrant lamb  
There seeking shelter from the noon-day sun;  
And pleasant, seated on the short soft turf,  
305 To look beneath upon the hollow way  
While heavily upward mov'd the labouring wain,<sup>o</sup>  
And stalking slowly by, the sturdy hind  
To ease his panting team, stopp'd with a stone  
The grating wheel.

Advancing higher still  
310 The prospect widens, and the village church  
But little, o'er the lowly roofs around  
Rears its gray belfry, and its simple vane;  
Those lowly roofs of thatch are half conceal'd  
By the rude arms of trees, lovely in spring,<sup>9</sup>  
315 When on each bough, the rosy-tinctur'd bloom  
Sits thick, and promises autumnal plenty.  
For even those orchards round the Norman Farms,  
Which, as their owners mark the promis'd fruit,  
Console them for the vineyards of the south,  
Surpass not these.

Where woods of ash, and beech,  
320 And partial copses, fringe the green hill foot,  
The upland shepherd rears his modest home,  
There wanders by, a little nameless stream  
That from the hill wells forth, bright now and clear,  
Or after rain with chalky mixture gray,  
325 But still refreshing in its shallow course,  
The cottage garden; most for use design'd,  
Yet not of beauty destitute. The vine  
Mantles the little casement; yet the briar  
Drops fragrant dew among the July flowers;  
330 And pansies rayed, and freak'd and mottled pinks  
Grow among balm, and rosemary and rue;



There honeysuckles flaunt, and roses blow  
Almost uncultured:° Some with dark green leaves  
Contrast their flowers of pure unsullied white;  
335 Others, like velvet robes of regal state  
Of richest crimson, while in thorny moss  
Enshrined and cradled, the most lovely, wear  
The hues of youthful beauty's glowing cheek.—  
With fond regret I recollect e'en now  
340 In Spring and Summer, what delight I felt  
Among these cottage gardens, and how much  
Such artless nosegays, knotted with a rush  
By village housewife or her ruddy maid,  
Were welcome to me; soon and simply pleas'd.

345 An early worshipper at Nature's shrine,  
I loved her rudest scenes—warrens,° and heaths,  
And yellow commons, and birch-shaded hollows,  
And hedge rows, bordering unfrequented lanes  
Bowered with wild roses, and the clasping woodbine  
350 Where purple tassels of the tangling vetch<sup>1</sup>  
With bittersweet, and bryony inweave,<sup>2</sup>  
And the dew fills the silver bindweed's<sup>3</sup> cups.—  
I loved to trace the brooks whose humid banks  
Nourish the harebell, and the freckled pagil;<sup>4</sup>  
355 And stroll among o'ershadowing woods of beech,  
Lending in Summer, from the heats of noon  
A whispering shade; while haply there reclines  
Some pensive lover of uncultur'd flowers,°  
Who, from the tumps° with bright green mosses  
360 clad,  
Plucks the wood sorrel,<sup>5</sup> with its light thin leaves,  
Heart-shaped, and triply folded; and its root  
Creeping like beaded coral; or who there  
Gathers, the copse's pride, anémones,<sup>6</sup>  
With rays like golden studs on ivory laid

365 Most delicate: but touch'd with purple clouds,  
Fit crown for April's fair but changeful brow.

Ah! hills so early loved! in fancy still  
I breathe your pure keen air; and still behold  
Those widely spreading views, mocking alike  
370 The Poet and the Painter's utmost art.  
And still, observing objects more minute,  
Wondering remark the strange and foreign forms  
Of sea-shells; with the pale calcareous<sup>o</sup> soil  
Mingled, and seeming of resembling substance.<sup>7</sup>  
375 Tho' surely the blue Ocean (from the heights  
Where the downs westward trend, but dimly seen)  
Here never roll'd its surge. Does Nature then  
Mimic, in wanton mood, fantastic shapes  
Of bivalves, and inwreathed volutes,<sup>8</sup> that cling  
380 To the dark sea-rock of the wat'ry world?  
Or did this range of chalky mountains, once<sup>9</sup>  
Form a vast basin, where the Ocean waves  
Swell'd fathomless? What time these fossil shells,  
Buoy'd on their native element, were thrown  
385 Among the imbedding calx:<sup>o</sup> when the huge hill  
Its giant bulk heaved, and in strange ferment  
Grew up a guardian barrier, 'twixt the sea  
And the green level of the sylvan weald.<sup>1</sup>

Ah! very vain is Science' proudest boast,  
390 And but a little light its flame yet lends  
To its most ardent votaries; since from whence  
These fossil forms are seen, is but conjecture,  
Food for vague theories, or vain dispute,  
While to his daily task the peasant goes,  
395 Unheeding such inquiry; with no care  
But that the kindly change of sun and shower,  
Fit for his toil the earth he cultivates.

As little reck's the herdsman of the hill,  
Who on some turfy knoll, idly reclined,  
400 Watches his wether<sup>o</sup> flock, that deep beneath  
Rest the remains of men, of whom is left<sup>2</sup>  
No traces in the records of mankind,  
Save what these half obliterated mounds  
And half fill'd trenches doubtfully impart  
405 To some lone antiquary; who on times remote,  
Since which two thousand years have roll'd away,  
Loves to contemplate. He perhaps may trace,  
Or fancy he can trace, the oblong square  
Where the mail'd legions, under Claudius,<sup>3</sup> rear'd  
410 The rampire,<sup>o</sup> or excavated fosse<sup>o</sup> delved;  
What time the huge unwieldy Elephant<sup>4</sup>  
Auxiliary reluctant, hither led,  
From Afric's forest glooms and tawny sands,  
First felt the Northern blast, and his vast frame  
415 Sunk useless; whence in after ages found,  
The wondering hinds, on those enormous bones  
Gaz'd; and in giants<sup>5</sup> dwelling on the hills  
Believed and marvell'd.—

Hither, Ambition come!

Come and behold the nothingness of all  
420 For which you carry thro' the oppressed Earth,  
War, and its train of horrors—see where tread  
The innumeros<sup>o</sup> hoofs of flocks above the works  
By which the warrior sought to register  
His glory, and immortalize his name.—  
425 The pirate Dane,<sup>6</sup> who from his circular camp  
Bore in destructive robbery, fire and sword  
Down thro' the vale, sleeps unremember'd here;  
And here, beneath the green sward, rests alike  
The savage native,<sup>7</sup> who his acorn meal  
430

Shar'd with the herds, that ranged the pathless  
woods;  
And the centurion, who on these wide hills  
Encamping, planted the Imperial Eagle.<sup>o</sup>  
All, with the lapse of Time, have passed away,  
Even as the clouds, with dark and dragon shapes,  
435 Or like vast promontories crown'd with towers,  
Cast their broad shadows on the downs: then sail  
Far to the northward, and their transient gloom  
Is soon forgotten.

But from thoughts like these,  
440 By human crimes suggested, let us turn  
To where a more attractive study courts  
The wanderer of the hills; while shepherd girls  
Will from among the fescue<sup>8</sup> bring him flowers,  
Of wondrous mockery; some resembling bees  
In velvet vest, intent on their sweet toil,<sup>9</sup>  
445 While others mimic flies,<sup>1</sup> that lightly sport  
In the green shade, or float along the pool,  
But here seen perch'd upon the slender stalk,  
And gathering honey dew. While in the breeze  
That wafts the thistle's plumed seed along,  
450 Blue bells wave tremulous. The mountain thyme<sup>2</sup>  
Purples the hassock<sup>o</sup> of the heaving mole,  
And the short turf is gay with tormentil,<sup>3</sup>  
And bird's foot trefoil, and the lesser tribes  
Of hawkweed;<sup>4</sup> spangling it with fringed stars.—  
455 Near where a richer tract of cultur'd land  
Slopes to the south; and burnished by the sun,  
Bend in the gale of August, floods of corn;  
The guardian of the flock, with watchful care,<sup>5</sup>  
Repels by voice and dog the encroaching sheep—  
460 While his boy visits every wired trap<sup>6</sup>  
That scars the turf; and from the pit-falls takes

The timid migrants,<sup>7</sup> who from distant wilds,  
Warrens, and stone quarries, are destined thus  
To lose their short existence. But unsought  
465 By Luxury yet, the Shepherd still protects  
The social bird,<sup>8</sup> who from his native haunts  
Of willowy current, or the rushy pool,  
Follows the fleecy crowd, and flirts and skims,  
In fellowship among them.

Where the knoll  
470 More elevated takes the changeful winds,  
The windmill rears its vanes; and thitherward  
With his white load,<sup>o</sup> the master travelling,  
Scares the rooks rising slow on whispering wings,  
While o'er his head, before the summer sun  
475 Lights up the blue expanse, heard more than seen,  
The lark sings matins; and above the clouds  
Floating, embathes his spotted breast in dew.  
Beneath the shadow of a gnarled thorn,  
Bent by the sea blast<sup>9</sup> from a seat of turf  
480 With fairy nosegays strewn, how wide the view!<sup>1</sup>  
Till in the distant north it melts away,  
And mingles indiscriminate with clouds:  
But if the eye could reach so far, the mart  
Of England's capital, its domes and spires  
485 Might be perceived.—Yet hence the distant range  
Of Kentish hills,<sup>2</sup> appear in purple haze;  
And nearer, undulate the wooded heights,  
And airy summits,<sup>3</sup> that above the mole<sup>o</sup>  
Rise in green beauty; and the beacon'd ridge  
490 Of Black-down<sup>4</sup> shagg'd with heath, and swelling  
rude  
Like a dark island from the vale; its brow  
Catching the last rays of the evening sun  
That gleam between the nearer park's old oaks,

495 Then lighten up the river, and make prominent  
The portal, and the ruin'd battlements<sup>5</sup>  
Of that dismantled fortress; rais'd what time  
The Conqueror's successors fiercely fought,  
Tearing with civil feuds the desolate land.  
But now a tiller of the soil dwells there,  
500 And of the turret's loop'd and rafter'd halls  
Has made an humbler homestead—Where he sees,  
Instead of armed foemen, herds that graze  
Along his yellow meadows; or his flocks  
At evening from the upland driv'n to fold.—

505 In such a castellated mansion once  
A stranger chose his home; and where hard by  
In rude disorder fallen, and hid with brushwood  
Lay fragments gray of towers and buttresses,  
Among the ruins, often he would muse.—  
510 His rustic meal soon ended, he was wont  
To wander forth, listening the evening sounds  
Of rushing milldam,<sup>6</sup> or the distant team,  
Or night-jar, chasing fern-flies:<sup>7</sup> the tir'd hind  
Pass'd him at nightfall, wondering he should sit  
515 On the hill top so late: they from the coast  
Who sought by-paths with their clandestine load,<sup>8</sup>  
Saw with suspicious doubt, the lonely man  
Cross on their way: but village maidens thought  
His senses injur'd; and with pity say  
520 That he, poor youth! must have been cross'd in love  
—

For often, stretch'd upon the mountain turf  
With folded arms, and eyes intently fix'd  
Where ancient elms and firs obscured a grange,<sup>9</sup>  
Some little space within the vale below,  
525 They heard him, as complaining of his fate,  
And to the murmuring wind, of cold neglect

And baffled hope he told.—The peasant girls  
These plaintive sounds remember, and even now  
Among them may be heard the stranger's songs.

530

Were I a Shepherd on the hill  
And ever as the mists withdrew  
Could see the willows of the rill  
Shading the footway to the mill  
Where once I walk'd with you—

535

And as away Night's shadows sail,  
And sounds of birds and brooks arise,  
Believe, that from the woody vale  
I hear your voice upon the gale  
In soothing melodies;

540

And viewing from the Alpine height,  
The prospect dress'd in hues of air,  
Could say, while transient colours bright  
Touch'd the fair scene with dewy light,  
'Tis, that *her* eyes are there!

545

I think, I could endure my lot  
And linger on a few short years,  
And then, by all but you forgot,  
Sleep, where the turf that clothes the spot  
May claim some pitying tears.

550

For 'tis not easy to forget  
One, who thro' life has lov'd you still,  
And you, however late, might yet  
With sighs to Memory giv'n, regret—  
The Shepherd of the Hill.

555

Yet otherwhile it seem'd as if young Hope  
Her flattering pencil gave to Fancy's hand,  
And in his wanderings, rear'd to sooth his soul

560 Ideal bowers of pleasure.—Then, of Solitude  
And of his hermit life, still more enamour'd,  
His home was in the forest; and wild fruits  
And bread sustain'd him. There in early spring  
The Barkmen<sup>8</sup> found him, e'er the sun arose;  
There at their daily toil, the Wedgecutters<sup>9</sup>  
Beheld him thro' the distant thicket move.  
565 The shaggy dog following the truffle hunter,<sup>1</sup>  
Bark'd at the loiterer; and perchance at night  
Belated villagers from fair or wake,  
While the fresh night-wind let the moonbeams in  
Between the swaying boughs, just saw him pass,  
570 And then in silence, gliding like a ghost  
He vanish'd! Lost among the deepening gloom.—  
But near one ancient tree, whose wreathed roots  
Form'd a rude couch, love-songs and scatter'd  
rhymes,  
Unfinish'd sentences, or half erased,  
575 And rhapsodies like this, were sometimes found—

Let us to woodland wilds repair  
While yet the glittering night-dews seem  
To wait the freshly-breathing air,  
Precursive of the morning beam,  
580 That rising with advancing day,  
Scatters the silver drops away.

An elm, uprooted by the storm,  
The trunk with mosses gray and green,  
Shall make for us a rustic form,  
585 Where lighter grows the forest scene;  
And far among the bowery shades,  
Are ferny lawns and grassy glades.

Retiring May to lovely June  
Her latest garland now resigns;



590 The banks with cuckoo-flowers<sup>2</sup> are strewn,  
The woodwalks blue with columbines,<sup>3</sup>  
And with its reeds, the wandering stream  
Reflects the flag-flower's<sup>4</sup> golden gleam.

595 There, feathering down the turf to meet,  
Their shadowy arms the beeches spread,  
While high above our sylvan seat,  
Lifts the light ash its airy head;  
And later leaved, the oaks between  
600 Extend their boughs of vernal green.

The slender birch its paper rind  
Seems offering to divided love,  
And shuddering even without a wind  
Aspens, their paler foliage move,  
605 As if some spirit of the air  
Breath'd a low sigh in passing there.

The Squirrel in his frolic mood,  
Will fearless bound among the boughs;  
Yaffils<sup>5</sup> laugh loudly thro' the wood,  
And murmuring ring-doves tell their vows;  
610 While we, as sweetest woodscent rise,  
Listen to woodland melodies.

And I'll contrive a sylvan room  
Against the time of summer heat,  
Where leaves, inwoven in Nature's loom,  
615 Shall canopy our green retreat;  
And gales that "close the eye of day"<sup>6</sup>  
Shall linger, e'er they die away.

And when a sere and fallow hue  
620 From early frost the bower receives,  
I'll dress the sand rock cave for you,

And strew the floor with heath and leaves,  
That you, against the autumnal air  
May find securer shelter there.

625 The Nightingale will then have ceas'd  
To sing her moonlight serenade;  
But the gay bird with blushing breast,<sup>7</sup>  
And Woodlarks<sup>8</sup> still will haunt the shade,  
And by the borders of the spring  
630 Reed-wrens<sup>9</sup> will yet be carolling.

The forest hermit's lonely cave  
None but such soothing sounds shall reach,  
Or hardly heard, the distant wave  
Slow breaking on the stony beach;  
635 Or winds, that now sigh soft and low,  
Now make wild music as they blow.

And then, before the chilling North  
The tawny foliage falling light,  
Seems, as it flits along the earth,  
The footfall of the busy Sprite,  
640 Who wrapt in pale autumnal gloom,  
Calls up the mist-born Mushroom.

Oh! could I hear your soft voice there,  
And see you in the forest green  
All beauteous as you are, more fair  
645 You'd look, amid the sylvan scene,  
And in a wood-girl's simple guise,  
Be still more lovely in mine eyes.

Ye phantoms of unreal delight,  
Visions of fond delirium born!  
650 Rise not on my deluded sight,  
Then leave me drooping and forlorn

To know, such bliss can never be,  
Unless Amanda loved like me.

655 The visionary, nursing dreams like these,  
Is not indeed unhappy. Summer woods  
Wave over him, and whisper as they wave,  
Some future blessings he may yet enjoy.  
And as above him sail the silver clouds,  
660 He follows them in thought to distant climes,  
Where, far from the cold policy of this,  
Dividing him from her he fondly loves,  
He, in some island of the southern sea,<sup>1</sup>  
May haply build his cane-constructed bower  
Beneath the bread-fruit, or aspiring palm,  
665 With long green foliage rippling in the gale.  
Oh! let him cherish his ideal bliss—  
For what is life, when Hope has ceas'd to strew  
Her fragile flowers along its thorny way?  
And sad and gloomy are his days, who lives  
670 Of Hope abandon'd!

Just beneath the rock  
Where Beachy overpeers the channel wave,  
Within a cavern mined by wintry tides  
Dwelt one,<sup>2</sup> who long disgusted with the world  
And all its ways, appear'd to suffer life  
675 Rather than live; the soul-reviving gale,  
Fanning the bean-field, or the thymy<sup>o</sup> heath,  
Had not for many summers breathed on him;  
And nothing mark'd to him the season's change,  
Save that more gently rose the placid sea,  
680 And that the birds which winter on the coast  
Gave place to other migrants; save that the fog,  
Hovering no more above the beetling cliffs  
Betray'd not then the little careless sheep<sup>3</sup>  
On the brink grazing, while their headlong fall

685 Near the lone Hermit's flint-surrounded home,  
Claim'd unavailing pity; for his heart  
Was feelingly alive to all that breath'd;  
And outraged as he was, in sanguine youth,  
690 By human crimes, he still acutely felt  
For human misery.

Wandering on the beach,  
He learn'd to augur from the clouds of heaven,  
And from the changing colours of the sea,  
And sullen murmurs of the hollow cliffs,  
695 Or the dark porpoises,<sup>4</sup> that near the shore  
Gambol'd and sported on the level brine  
When tempests were approaching: then at night  
He listen'd to the wind; and as it drove  
The billows with o'erwhelming vehemence  
700 He, starting from his rugged couch, went forth  
And hazarding a life, too valueless,  
He waded thro' the waves, with plank or pole  
Towards where the mariner in conflict dread  
Was buffeting for life the roaring surge;  
705 And now just seen, now lost in foaming gulphs,  
The dismal gleaming of the clouded moon  
Shew'd the dire peril. Often he had snatch'd  
From the wild billows, some unhappy man  
Who liv'd to bless the hermit of the rocks.  
710 But if his generous cares were all in vain,  
And with slow swell the tide of morning bore  
Some blue swol'n cor'se<sup>o</sup> to land; the pale recluse  
Dug in the chalk a sepulchre—above  
Where the dank sea-wrack<sup>o</sup> mark'd the utmost tide,  
715 And with his prayers perform'd the obsequies  
For the poor helpless stranger.

One dark night  
The equinoctial wind blew south by west,

Fierce on the shore;—the bellowing cliffs were shook  
 Even to their stony base, and fragments fell  
 Flashing and thundering on the angry flood.  
 720 At day-break, anxious for the lonely man,  
 His cave the mountain shepherds visited,  
 Tho' sand and banks of weeds had choak'd their  
 way.—  
 He was not in it; but his drowned cor'se  
 By the waves wafted, near his former home  
 725 Receiv'd the rites of burial. Those who read  
 Chisel'd within the rock, these mournful lines,  
 Memorials of his sufferings, did not grieve,  
 That dying in the cause of charity  
 730 His spirit, from its earthly bondage freed,  
 Had to some better region fled for ever.

1806

1807

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This is the longest of several works left in manuscript when Smith died in October 1806. It was published in the posthumous volume *Beachy Head, Fables, and Other Poems* the following year. It is not known to what degree Smith considered the poem finished.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In crossing the Channel from the coast of France, Beachy-Head is the first land made [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Alluding to an idea that this Island was once joined to the continent of Europe, and torn from it by some convulsion in Nature. I confess I never could trace the resemblance between the two countries. Yet the cliffs about Dieppe, resemble the chalk cliffs on the Southern coast. But Normandy has no likeness whatever to the part of England opposite to it [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Terns. *Sterna hirundo*, or Sea Swallow. Gulls. *Larus canus*. Tarrocks. *Larus tridactylus* [*Smith's note*].[Return to](#)

[reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Gray choughs. *Corvus Graculus*, Cornish Choughs, or, as these birds are called by the Sussex people, Saddle-backed Crows, build in great numbers on this coast [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, to produce silk.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Cotton. *Gossypium herbaceum* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Diamonds, the hardest and most valuable of precious stones. For the extraordinary exertions of the Indians in diving for the pearl oysters, see the account of the Pearl fisheries in Percival's *View of Ceylon* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Ship that sails along the coast.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In crossing the channel this bird is heard at night, uttering a short cry, and flitting along near the surface of the waves. The sailors call it the Sea Snipe; but I can find no species of sea bird of which this is the vulgar name. A bird so called inhabits the Lake of Geneva [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Pevensey Castle [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3:

The Scandinavians (modern Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Lapland, &c.) and other inhabitants of the north, began towards the end of the 8th century, to leave their inhospitable climate in search of the produce of more fortunate countries. —The North-men made inroads on the coasts of France; and carrying back immense booty, excited their compatriots to engage in the same piratical voyages: and they were afterwards joined by numbers of necessitous and daring adventurers from the coasts of Provence and Sicily. —In 844, these wandering innovators had a great number of vessels at sea; and again visiting the coasts of France, Spain,

[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The seven kingdoms of Saxon England.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Battle Abbey was raised by the Conqueror, and endowed with an ample revenue, that masses might be said night and day for the souls of those who perished in battle [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6:  
In 1690, King William being then in Ireland, Tourville, the French admiral, arrived on the coast of England. His fleet consisted of seventy-eight large ships, and twenty-two fire-ships. Lord Torrington, the English admiral, lay at St. Helens, with only forty English and a few Dutch ships; and conscious of the disadvantage under which he should give battle, he ran up between the enemy's fleet and the coast, to protect it. The queen's council, dictated to by Russel, persuaded her to order Torrington to venture a battle. The orders Torrington appears to have obeyed reluctantly: his fleet now consisted of twenty-two Dutch and thirty-four English ships. Evertson, the Dutch  
[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The shepherds and labourers of this tract of country, a hardy and athletic race of men, are almost universally engaged in the contraband trade, carried on for the coarsest and most destructive spirits, with the opposite coast. When no other vessel will venture to sea, these men hazard their lives to elude the watchfulness of the Revenue officers, and to secure their cargoes [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Sun-dew. *Drosera rotundifolia*. Buck-bean. *Menyanthes trifoliatum* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Plover. *Tringa vanellus* [*Smith's note*]. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Arcadia, an imagined land of peace and simplicity.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Coot. *Fulica aterrima* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A reedy plant burned for light.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "With blossom'd furze, unprofitably gay." Goldsmith [*Smith's note*]. Smith is citing Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted*

*Village*, line 194.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: The Beacons formerly lighted up on the hills to give notice of the approach of an enemy. These signals would still be used in case of alarm, if the Telegraph [the signaling apparatus] now substituted could not be distinguished on account of fog or darkness [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Curlew. *Charadrius oedienemus* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A bed stuffed with tufts of wool.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Vecta. The Isle of Wight, which breaks the force of the waves when they are driven by southwest winds against this long and open coast. It is somewhere described as "Vecta shouldering the Western Waves" [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Every cottage in this country has its orchard; and I imagine that not even those of Herefordshire, or Worcestershire, exhibit a more beautiful prospect, when the trees are in bloom, and the "Primavera candida e vermiglia," is every where so enchanting [*Smith's note*]. Smith is quoting Petrarch's sonnet 310, "pure and ruddy spring." [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Vetch. *Vicia sylvatica* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Bittersweet. *Solatum dulcamara*. Bryony. *Bryonia alba* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Bindweed. *Convolvulus sepium* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Harebell. *Hyacinthus non scriptus*. Pagil. *Primula veris* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Sorrel. *Oxalis acetosella* [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Anémones. *Anemone nemorosa*. It appears to be settled on late and excellent authorities, that this word should not be accented on the second syllable, but on the penultima. I have however ventured the more known accentuation, as more generally used, and suiting better the nature of my verse [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 6](#)



- Note 7:

Among the crumbling chalk I have often found shells, some quite in a fossil state and hardly distinguishable from chalk. Others appeared more recent; cockles, muscles, and periwinkles, I well remember, were among the number; and some whose names I do not know. A great number were like those of small land snails. It is now many years since I made these observations. The appearance of sea-shells so far from the sea excited my surprise, though I then knew nothing of natural history. I have never read any of the late theories of the earth, nor was I ever satisfied with the attempts to explain many of the phenomena which call forth conjecture in those

[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Spiral-shelled mollusks such as periwinkles. "Bivalves": hinge-shelled mollusks such as clams and oysters.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The theory here slightly hinted at, is taken from an idea started by Mr. White [*Smith's note*]. Smith is referring to Gilbert White, author of *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789; see p. 62, above).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The Sussex Weald, a wooded tract of land between the North and South Downs.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: These downs are not only marked with traces of encampments, which from their forms are called Roman or Danish; but there are numerous tumuli [burial mounds] among them. Some of which having been opened a few years ago, were supposed by a learned antiquary to contain the remains of the original natives of the country [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That the legions of Claudius [10 B.C.E.–54 C.E.] were in this part of Britain appears certain. Since this emperor received the submission of Cantii, Atrebates, Irenobates, and Regni, in which latter denomination were included the people of Sussex [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4:

In the year 1740, some workmen digging in the park at Burton in Sussex, discovered, nine feet below the surface, the teeth and bones of an elephant; two of the former were seven feet eight inches in length. There were besides these, tusks, one of which broke in removing it, a grinder not at all decayed, and a part of the jaw-bone, with bones of the knee and thigh, and several others. Some of them remained very lately at Burton House, the seat of John Biddulph, Esq. Others were in possession of the Rev. Dr. Langrish, minister of Petworth at that period, who was present when some of these bones were taken up, and gave it as his opinion, that they had

[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: The peasants believe that the large bones sometimes found belonged to giants, who formerly lived on the hills. The devil also has a great deal to do with the remarkable forms of hill and vale: the Devil's Punch Bowl, the Devil's Leaps, and the Devil's Dyke, are names given to deep hollows, or high and abrupt ridges, in this and the neighbouring county [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The incursions of the Danes were for many ages the scourge of this island [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Aborigines of this country lived in woods, unsheltered but by trees and caves; and were probably as truly savage as any of those who are now termed so [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The grass called Sheep's Fescue (*Festuca ovina*), clothes these Downs with the softest turf [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: *Ophrys apifera*, Bee Ophrys, or Orchis found plentifully on the hills, as well as the next [*Smith's note*]. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *Ophrys muscifera*. Fly Orchis. Linnæus, misled by the variations to which some of this tribe are really subject, has perhaps too rashly esteemed all those which resemble insects,

as forming only one species, which he terms *Ophrys insecti fera*. See *English Botany* [Smith's note].[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2:

Blue bells. *Campanula rotundifolia*. Mountain thyme. *Thymus serpyllum*. "It is a common notion, that the flesh of sheep which feeds upon aromatic plants, particularly wild thyme, is superior in flavour to other mutton. The truth is, that sheep do not crop these aromatic plants, unless now and then by accident, or when they are first turned on hungry to downs, heaths, or commons; but the soil and situations favourable to aromatic plants, produce a short sweet pasturage, best adapted to feeding sheep, whom nature designed for mountains, and not for turnip grounds and rich meadows. The attachment of bees to this, and other aromatic plants, is well

[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Tormentil. *Tormentilla reptans* [Smith's note].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Bird's foot trefoil. *Trifolium ornithopoides*. Hawkweed. *Hieracium*, many sorts [Smith's note].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The downs, especially to the south, where they are less abrupt, are in many places under the plough; and the attention of the shepherds is there particularly required to keep the flocks from trespassing [Smith's note].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Square holes cut in the turf, into which a wire noose is fixed, to catch Wheatears. Mr. White [*Natural History of Selborne*] says, that these birds (*Motacilla oenanthe*) are never taken beyond the river Adur, and Beding Hill; but this is certainly a mistake [Smith's note].[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: These birds are extremely fearful, and on the slightest appearance of a cloud, run for shelter to the first rut, or heap of stone, that they see [Smith's note].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The Yellow Wagtail. *Motacilla flava*. It frequents the banks of rivulets in winter, making its nest in meadows and corn-fields. But after the breeding season is over, it haunts downs and sheepwalks, and is seen constantly among the

flocks, probably for the sake of the insects it picks up. In France the shepherds call it *La Bergeronette*, and say it often gives them, by its cry, notice of approaching danger [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: The strong winds from the south-west occasion almost all the trees, which on these hills are exposed to it, to grow the other way [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: So extensive are some of the views from these hills, that only the want of power in the human eye to travel so far, prevents London itself being discerned. Description falls so infinitely short of the reality, that only here and there, distinct features can be given [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A scar of chalk in a hill beyond Sevenoaks in Kent, is very distinctly seen of a clear day [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The hills about Dorking in Surry; over almost the whole extent of which county the prospect extends [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This is an high ridge, extending between Sussex and Surry. It is covered with heath, and has almost always a dark appearance. On it is a telegraph [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In this country there are several of the fortresses or castles built by Stephen of Blois [king of England, 1135–54], in his contention for the kingdom, with the daughter of Henry the First, the empress Matilda. Some of these are now converted into farm houses [*Smith's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, the water in the dammed millstream.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7:  
Dr. Aikin remarks, I believe, in his essay "On the Application of Natural History to the Purposes of Poetry," how many of our best poets have noticed the same circumstance, the hum of the Dor Beetle (*Scaraboeus stercorarius*) among the sounds heard by the evening wanderer. I remember only one instance in which the more remarkable, though by no means uncommon

noise, of the Fern Owl, or Goatsucker, is mentioned. It is called the Night Hawk, the Jar Bird, the Churn Owl, and the Fern Owl from its feeding on the *Scaraboeus solstitialis*, or Fern Chafer, which it catches while on the wing with its claws, the middle toe of which is long and curiously serrated, on purpose to hold

[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: As soon as the sap begins to rise, the trees intended for felling are cut and barked. At which time the men who are employed in that business pass whole days in the woods [Smith's note].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The wedges used in ship-building are made of beech wood, and great numbers are cut every year in the woods near the Downs [Smith's note].[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Truffles are found under the beech woods, by means of small dogs trained to hunt them by the scent [Smith's note].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Cuckoo-flowers. *Lychnis dioica*. Shakespeare describes the Cuckoo buds as being yellow [*Love's Labor's Lost* 5.2.871]. He probably meant the numerous Ranunculi, or March marigolds (*Caltha palustris*) which so gild the meadows in Spring; but poets have never been botanists. The Cuckoo flower is the *Lychnis flos-cuculi* [Smith's note].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Columbines. *Aquilegia vulgaris* [Smith's note].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Flag-flower. *Iris pseudacorus* [Smith's note].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Yaffils. Woodpeckers (*Picus*); three or four species in Britain [Smith's note].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: "And liquid notes that close the eye of day." Milton [Sonnet 1, "O Nightingale"]. The idea here meant to be conveyed is of the evening wind, so welcome after a hot day of Summer, and which appears to sooth and lull all nature into tranquillity [Smith's note].[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Robin (*Motacilla rubecula*), which is always heard after other songsters have ceased to sing [Smith's note].[Return](#)

[to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: The Woodlark (*Alauda nemorosa*), sings very late [Smith's note].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Reed-wrens (*Motacilla arundinacea*), sing all the summer and autumn, and are often heard during the night [Smith's note]. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: An allusion to the visionary delights of the newly discovered islands [Polynesia], where it was at first believed men lived in a state of simplicity and happiness; but where, as later enquiries have ascertained, that exemption from toil, which the fertility of their country gives them, produces the grossest vices; and a degree of corruption that late navigators think will end in the extirpation of the whole people in a few years [Smith's note].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In a cavern almost immediately under the cliff called Beachy Head, there lived, as the people of the country believed, a man of the name of Darby, who for many years had no other abode than this cave, and subsisted almost entirely on shell-fish. He had often administered assistance to shipwrecked mariners; but venturing into the sea on this charitable mission during a violent equinoctial storm, he himself perished. As it is above thirty years since I heard this tradition of Parson Darby (for so I think he was called): it may now perhaps be forgotten [Smith's note].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sometimes in thick weather the sheep feeding on the summit of the cliff, miss their footing, and are killed by the fall [Smith's note].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Dark porpoises. *Delphinus phocaena* [Smith's note].[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: dawn[Return to reference °](#)
- °: noon[Return to reference °](#)
- °: enclosed[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *stringed instrument*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Venus*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *projecting*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Normandy*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *France*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Dutch*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *historical record*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *haystacks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *peasant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *peat bog*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *uncultivated land*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pretending to be*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *willows*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wild mustard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *as if*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carriage*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *will-o'-the-wisp*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trunk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *firth, inlet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wagon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *uncultivated*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *land for breeding*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wildflowers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hillocks, mounds*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chalky*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lime*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *male sheep*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rampart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ditch*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *countless*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *the Roman standard*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tuft of grass*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *load of grain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cliff*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *smuggled goods*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *farm*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *recall with regret*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *abounding in thyme*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *corpse*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *refuse from the sea*[Return to reference °](#)



# MARY ROBINSON

## 1757?–1800

Mary Robinson, whom the *Dictionary of National Biography*, at the beginning of a long entry, describes as “actress, author, and mistress of George, Prince of Wales,” lived a more sensational life than any other poet of the period, Byron and Shelley included. Her father was a Bristol whaler, her mother a woman of “genteel background” who, after her husband deserted the family, ran a school for girls. At fifteen Mary was married to Thomas Robinson, an articled law clerk who seemed a good match but quickly proved a gambler and libertine; he was arrested for debt, and Mary and her infant daughter spent a year with him in debtors’ prison, where, to pass the time, she began writing poetry. Her first pieces appeared in a two-volume *Poems* published under the patronage of the Duchess of Devonshire in 1775.

In December 1776, accepting a long-standing invitation of David Garrick, the actor-manager of the Drury Lane theater, Robinson made her stage debut as Juliet, and for the next four years she was constantly before the public—in thirty or more principal roles, nine of them in plays by Shakespeare. A beauty and leader of fashion, she attracted many suitors and was painted by many of the leading portraitists of the day, including George Romney, Thomas Gainsborough, and Sir Joshua Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy. At a command performance of *The Winter’s Tale* in December 1779, playing the role of Perdita, Robinson captivated the

teenaged prince of Wales and, after negotiating financial compensation in the form of a £20,000 bond (because she would have to give up her acting career), became his mistress. As a royal mistress, she was even more exposed to the public eye than she had been on the stage; years after the prince abandoned her, ribald speculation about the erotic adventures of "Perdita" continued to engross gossip columnists and satiric cartoonists. Robinson's attempt, following the prince's desertion, to sue for the promised £20,000 failed, but through the efforts of the Whig parliamentarian Charles James Fox, another famous man who may have been her lover, she received an annuity from the prince of £500 per year. At twenty-five she formed an attachment with Banastre Tarleton, an army officer who had just returned from the war in America and was embarking on a career in Parliament. That attachment lasted ten years, until Tarleton married an heiress. Robinson was by this time in poor health and, as a consequence of either a miscarriage (in some accounts) or rheumatic fever (in others), was paralyzed from the waist down. Even in this condition she made a striking public figure, as four liveried servants, covering their arms with long white sleeves, bore her from the opera house to her waiting carriage. A savvy self-publicist, she appears to have been well aware of the part she played in the spectacle that was fashionable London, accepting and even embracing (in the words of her modern editor, Judith Pascoe) her role as "the most attractive object in a large urban display."

Literature became Robinson's principal activity and source of income when she was in her early thirties. In 1788 and 1789, writing under the pen name "Laura Maria" and sending her verse to the papers the *World* and the *Oracle*, she entered into a passionate poetical correspondence with "Della Crusca" (pseudonym of the poet Robert Merry, who had already participated in a similar public flirtation in the periodical press, in the series of love poems he exchanged with "Anna Matilda," the poet Hannah Cowley). When, in her *Poems* of 1791, Robinson reprinted some of these "effusions" of feeling, she attracted six hundred subscribers. In 1796 she contributed to the English revival of the sonnet with her Petrarchan

series *Sappho and Phaon*. In the 1790s she also authored seven novels, beginning in 1792 with *Vacenza, or The Dangers of Credulity*. She succeeded Robert Southey in the influential office of poetry editor of the *Morning Post* in 1799. Other writings by Robinson include her political tracts *Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France* (1793) and *Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799) and her posthumous *Memoirs* (1801), an autobiography whose description of a woman's poetic vocation makes it (like Robinson's critical discussion of the Greek poet of passion Sappho) exceptional in an era now better known for its models of masculine artistry.

Robinson is one of the accomplished writers of blank verse in the 1790s (as in "London's Summer Morning") as well as one of the most irrepressibly musical in many different forms of rhyme. Outspokenly liberal in its politics, good-humored, satirical, and sentimental by turns, her late verse in particular exemplifies what Stuart Curran calls "the new realism that will impel English poetry into the nineteenth century." *Lyrical Tales* (1800), the final volume of Robinson's poetry to be published in her lifetime, appeared the month before the second edition of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*—from the same publisher and printer and in exactly the same format and typography (Wordsworth, in reaction, tried to change his own title to *Poems by W. Wordsworth*). Robinson's "The Poor Singing Dame" is modeled on the most popular of Wordsworth's 1798 ballads, "Goody Blake and Harry Gill." Wordsworth in turn based one of his pieces ("The Seven Sisters; or, The Solitude of Binnorie") on the elaborate metrical scheme of Robinson's "The Haunted Beach," a poem that prompted Coleridge to exclaim to Southey, when he first saw it in the *Morning Post*, "the Metre—ay! that Woman has an Ear." Coleridge admired her "undoubted Genius," and Robinson returned the compliment in one of her last poems, "To the Poet Coleridge," a shrewd reading of "Kubla Khan" sixteen years before it first got into print.

## January, 1795<sup>1</sup>

Pavement slipp'ry, people sneezing,  
Lords in ermine, beggars freezing;  
Titled gluttons dainties carving,  
Genius in a garret starving.

5      Lofty mansions, warm and spacious;  
Courtiers cringing and voracious;  
Misers scarce the wretched heeding;  
Gallant soldiers fighting, bleeding.

10      Wives who laugh at passive spouses;  
Theatres, and meeting-houses;  
Balls, where simp'ring misses languish;  
Hospitals, and groans of anguish.

15      Arts and sciences bewailing;  
Commerce drooping, credit failing;  
Placemen<sup>o</sup> mocking subjects loyal;  
Separations, weddings royal.

20      Authors who can't earn a dinner;  
Many a subtle rogue a winner;  
Fugitives for shelter seeking;  
Misers hoarding, tradesmen breaking.<sup>o</sup>

Taste and talents quite deserted;  
All the laws of truth perverted;  
Arrogance o'er merit soaring;  
Merit silently deploring.

Ladies gambling night and morning;  
Fools the works of genius scorning;

25 Ancient dames for girls mistaken,  
 Youthful damsels quite forsaken.  
  
 Some in luxury delighting;  
 30 More in talking than in fighting;  
 Lovers old, and beaux decrepid;  
 Lordlings empty and insipid.  
  
 Poets, painters, and musicians;  
 Lawyers, doctors, politicians:  
 35 Pamphlets, newspapers, and odes,  
 Seeking fame by diff'rent roads.  
  
 Gallant souls with empty purses;  
 Gen'als only fit for nurses;  
 School-boys, smit with martial spirit,  
 40 Taking place of vet'ran merit.  
  
 Honest men who can't get places,  
 Knaves who shew unblushing faces;  
 Ruin hasten'd, peace retarded;  
 Candor spurn'd, and art rewarded.

1795

1806

## Endnotes

- Note 1: First published in the *Morning Post* as the work of "Portia." [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *political appointees* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *going bankrupt* [Return to reference °](#)

## London's Summer Morning

Who has not wak'd to list the busy sounds  
Of summer's morning, in the sultry smoke  
Of noisy London? On the pavement hot  
The sooty chimney-boy, with dingy face  
And tatter'd covering, shrilly bawls his trade,  
5 Rousing the sleepy housemaid. At the door  
The milk-pail rattles, and the tinkling bell  
Proclaims the dustman's<sup>o</sup> office; while the street  
Is lost in clouds impervious. Now begins  
The din of hackney-coaches, waggons, carts;  
10 While tinmen's shops, and noisy trunk-makers,  
Knife-grinders, coopers, squeaking cork-cutters,  
Fruit-barrows, and the hunger-giving cries  
Of vegetable venders, fill the air.  
Now ev'ry shop displays its varied trade,  
15 And the fresh-sprinkled pavement cools the feet  
Of early walkers. At the private door  
The ruddy housemaid twirls the busy mop,<sup>1</sup>  
Annoying the smart 'prentice, or neat girl,  
Tripping with band-box<sup>2</sup> lightly. Now the sun  
20 Darts burning splendor on the glitt'ring pane,  
Save where the canvas awning throws a shade  
On the gay merchandise. Now, spruce and trim,  
In shops (where beauty smiles with industry)  
Sits the smart damsel; while the passenger<sup>o</sup>  
25 Peeps through the window, watching ev'ry charm.  
Now pastry dainties catch the eye minute  
Of humming insects, while the limy snare<sup>3</sup>  
Waits to enthrall them. Now the lamp-lighter  
Mounts the tall ladder, nimbly venturous,

30 To trim the half-fill'd I while at his feet  
 The pot-boy<sup>4</sup> yells discordant! All along  
 The sultry pavement, the old-clothes-man cries  
 In tone monotonous, and side-long views  
 35 The area for his traffic: now the bag  
 Is slily open'd, and the half-worn suit  
 (Sometimes the pilfer'd treasure of the base  
 Domestic spoiler), for one half its worth,  
 Sinks in the green abyss. The porter now  
 40 Bears his huge load along the burning way;  
 And the poor poet wakes from busy dreams,  
 To paint the summer morning.

1795–1800

1800

## Endnotes

- Note 1: An echo of Jonathan Swift's urban pastoral "A Description of the Morning" (1709), in which Moll whirls "her mop with dex'trous airs" (line 7). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Box for hats, gloves, and the like. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sticky substance used to catch insects. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Servant from a nearby pub. [Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *trash collector's* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *passerby* [Return to reference °](#)

## The Poor Singing Dame

Beneath an old wall, that went round an old castle,  
For many a year, with brown ivy o'erspread,  
A neat little hovel, its lowly roof raising,  
Defied the wild winds that howl'd over its shed:  
5 The turrets, that frown'd on the poor simple  
dwelling,  
Were rock'd to and fro, when the tempest would  
roar,  
And the river, that down the rich valley was swelling,  
Flow'd swiftly beside the green step of its door.

The summer sun gilded the rushy roof slanting,  
The bright dews bespangled its ivy-bound hedge,  
10 And above, on the ramparts, the sweet birds were  
chanting,  
And wild buds thick dappled the clear river's edge.  
When the castle's rich chambers were haunted and  
dreary,  
The poor little hovel was still and secure;  
And no robber e'er enter'd, nor goblin nor fairy,  
15 For the splendors of pride had no charms to allure.

The Lord of the castle, a proud surly ruler,  
Oft heard the low dwelling with sweet music ring,  
For the old Dame that liv'd in the little hut cheerly,  
Would sit at her wheel, and would merrily sing:  
20 When with revels the castle's great hall was  
resounding,  
The old Dame was sleeping, not dreaming of fear;  
And when over the mountains the huntsmen were  
bounding



She would open her lattice, their clamors to hear.

25 To the merry-ton'd horn she would dance on the  
threshold,  
And louder, and louder, repeat her old song:  
And when winter its mantle of frost was displaying,  
She caroll'd, undaunted, the bare woods among:  
She would gather dry fern, ever happy and singing,  
30 With her cake of brown bread, and her jug of  
brown beer,  
And would smile when she heard the great castle-  
bell ringing,  
Inviting the proud—to their prodigal cheer.

Thus she liv'd, ever patient and ever contented,  
Till envy the Lord of the castle possess'd,  
35 For he hated that poverty should be so cheerful,  
While care could the fav'rites of fortune molest;  
He sent his bold yeomen with threats to prevent her,  
And still would she carol her sweet roundelay;  
At last, an old steward relentless he sent her—  
40 Who bore her, all trembling, to prison away!

Three weeks did she languish, then died broken-  
hearted,  
Poor Dame! how the death-bell did mournfully  
sound!  
And along the green path six young bachelors bore  
her,  
And laid her for ever beneath the cold ground!  
And the primroses pale 'mid the long grass were  
45 growing,  
The bright dews of twilight bespangled her grave,  
And morn heard the breezes of summer soft blowing  
To bid the fresh flow'rets in sympathy wave.

50 The Lord of the castle, from that fatal moment  
When poor singing Mary was laid in her grave,  
Each night was surrounded by screech-owls  
appalling,  
Which o'er the black turrets their pinions would  
wave!

On the ramparts that frown'd on the river, swift  
flowing,  
They hover'd, still hooting a terrible song,  
55 When his windows would rattle, the winter blast  
blowing,  
They would shriek like a ghost, the dark alleys  
among!

Wherever he wander'd they follow'd him crying,  
At dawnlight, at eve, still they haunted his way!  
When the moon shone across the wide common they  
hooted,  
Nor quitted his path till the blazing of day.  
60 His bones began wasting, his flesh was decaying,  
And he hung his proud head, and he perish'd with  
shame;  
And the tomb of rich marble, no soft tear displaying,  
O'ershadows the grave of the Poor Singing Dame!

# The Haunted Beach

Upon a lonely desert Beach,  
Where the white foam was scatter'd,  
A little shed uprear'd its head,  
Though lofty barks<sup>o</sup> were shatter'd.  
The sea-weeds gath'ring near the door  
5 A somber path display'd;  
And, all around, the deaf'ning roar  
Re-echo'd on the chalky shore,  
By the green billows made.

Above a jutting cliff was seen  
10 Where Sea Birds hover'd, craving;  
And all around the craggs were bound  
With weeds—for ever waving.  
And here and there, a cavern wide  
Its shad'wy jaws display'd;  
15 And near the sands, at ebb of tide,  
A shiver'd mast was seen to ride  
Where the green billows stray'd.

And often, while the moaning wind  
Stole o'er the Summer Ocean,  
20 The moonlight scene was all serene,  
The waters scarce in motion;  
Then, while the smoothly slanting sand  
The tall cliff wrapp'd in shade,  
The Fisherman beheld a band  
25 Of Spectres gliding hand in hand—  
Where the green billows play'd.

And pale their faces were as snow,

And sullenly they wander'd;  
And to the skies with hollow eyes  
30 They look'd as though they ponder'd.  
And sometimes, from their hammock shroud,  
They dismal howlings made,  
And while the blast blew strong and loud  
The clear moon mark'd the ghastly crowd,  
35 Where the green billows play'd!

And then above the haunted hut  
The Curlews screaming hover'd;  
And the low door, with furious roar,  
The frothy breakers cover'd.  
40 For in the Fisherman's lone shed  
A murder'd man was laid,  
With ten wide gashes in his head,  
And deep was made his sandy bed  
Where the green billows play'd.  
45

A shipwreck'd Mariner was he,  
Doom'd from his home to sever;  
Who swore to be through wind and sea  
Firm and undaunted ever!  
And when the wave resistless roll'd,  
50 About his arm he made  
A packet rich of Spanish gold,  
And, like a British sailor bold,  
Plung'd where the billows play'd!

The Spectre band, his messmates brave,  
55 Sunk in the yawning ocean,  
While to the mast he lash'd him fast,  
And brav'd the storm's commotion.  
The winter moon upon the sand  
A silv'ry carpet made,  
60 And mark'd the Sailor reach the land,

And mark'd his murd'rer wash his hand  
Where the green billows play'd.

And since that hour the Fisherman  
Has toil'd and toil'd in vain;  
65 For all the night the moony light  
Gleams on the specter'd main!  
And when the skies are veil'd in gloom,  
The Murd'rer's liquid way  
70 Bounds o'er the deeply yawning tomb,  
And flashing fires the sands illume,  
Where the green billows play!

Full thirty years his task has been  
Day after day more weary;  
For Heav'n design'd his guilty mind  
75 Should dwell on prospects dreary.  
Bound by a strong and mystic chain,  
He has not pow'r to stray;  
But destin'd mis'ry to sustain,  
80 He wastes, in Solitude and Pain,  
A loathsome life away.

1800

## Notes

- °: *ships*[Return to reference °](#)

## The Poet's Garret

Come, sportive fancy! come with me, and trace  
The poet's attic home! the lofty seat  
Of the heav'n-tutor'd nine!° the airy throne  
Of bold imagination, rapture fraught  
Above the herds of mortals. All around  
5 A solemn stillness seems to guard the scene,  
Nursing the brood of thought—a thriving brood  
In the rich mazes of the cultur'd brain.  
Upon thy altar, an old worm-eat board,  
The pannel of a broken door, or lid  
10 Of a strong coffer, plac'd on three-legg'd stool,  
Stand quires of paper, white and beautiful!  
Paper, by destiny ordain'd to be  
Scrawl'd o'er and blotted; dash'd, and scratch'd, and  
torn;  
Or mark'd with lines severe, or scatter'd wide  
15 In rage impetuous! Sonnet, song, and ode,  
Satire, and epigram, and smart charade;  
Neat paragraph, or legendary tale,  
Of short and simple metre, each by turns  
Will there delight the reader.

20  
On the bed  
Lies an old rusty° suit of "solemn black,"—  
Brush'd thread-bare, and, with brown, unglossy hue,  
Grown somewhat ancient. On the floor is seen  
A pair of silken hose, whose footing bad  
Shews they are trav'lers, but who still bear  
25 Marks somewhat *holy*. At the scanty fire  
A chop turns round, by packthread strongly held;  
And on the blacken'd bar a vessel shines

Of batter'd pewter, just half fill'd, and warm,  
30 With Whitbread's bev'rage pure.<sup>1</sup> The kitten purs,  
Anticipating dinner; while the wind  
Whistles thro' broken panes, and drifted snow  
Carpets the parapet with spotless garb,  
Of vestal coldness. Now the sullen hour  
35 (The fifth hour after noon) with dusky hand  
Closes the lids of day. The farthing light  
Gleams thro' the cobwebb'd chamber, and the bard  
Concludes his pen's hard labour. Now he eats  
With appetite voracious! nothing sad  
40 That he with costly plate, and napkins fine,  
Nor china rich, nor fork of silver, greets  
His eye or palate. On his lyric board  
A sheet of paper serves for table-cloth;  
An heap of salt is serv'd,—oh! heav'nly treat!  
45 On ode Pindaric!<sup>2</sup> while his tuneful puss  
Scratches his slipper for her fragment sweet,  
And sings her love-song soft, yet mournfully.  
Mocking the pillar Doric, or the roof  
Of architecture Gothic, all around  
50 The well-known ballads flit, of Grub-street fame!<sup>3</sup>  
The casement, broke, gives breath celestial  
To the long dying-speech; or gently fans  
The love-inflaming sonnet. All around  
Small scraps of paper lie, torn vestiges  
55 Of an unquiet fancy. Here a page  
Of flights poetic—there a dedication—  
A list of dramatis personæ, bold,  
Of heroes yet unborn, and lofty dames  
Of perishable compound, light as fair,  
60 But sentenc'd to oblivion!<sup>4</sup>

On a shelf,  
(Yclept<sup>5</sup> a mantle-piece) a phial stands,

Half fill'd with potent spirits!—spirits strong,  
 Which sometimes haunt the poet's restless brain,  
 And fill his mind with fancies whimsical.  
 Poor poet! happy art thou, thus remov'd  
 65 From pride and folly! for in thy domain  
 Thou can'st command thy subjects; fill thy lines;  
 Wield th' all-conqu'ring weapon heav'n bestows  
 On the grey goose's wing!° which, tow'ring high,  
 70 Bears thy sick fancy to immortal fame!

1800

1806

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Beer from Samuel Whitbread's brewery.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The tablecloth is an ode written in the manner of the classical Greek poet Pindar (ca. 518–438 B.C.E.).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Originally the name for a London street (now Milton Street) that through the 18th century was often inhabited by third-rate authors churning out writing for money. The term came to designate literary hackwork generally.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: From Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1743); compare the description of the dunce in chief, at a moment of writer's block: "Round him much Embryo, much Abortion lay, / Much future Ode, and abdicated Play" (1.121–22).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Called; the word was an archaism in Robinson's time, associated with antiquated poetry.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *the muses*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *shabby*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *goose-quill pen*[Return to reference °](#)



# To the Poet Coleridge<sup>1</sup>

Rapt in the visionary theme!

Spirit divine! with thee I'll wander,  
Where the blue, wavy, lucid stream,  
'Mid forest glooms, shall slow meander!  
With thee I'll trace the circling bounds  
5 Of thy new Paradise extended;  
And listen to the varying sounds  
Of winds, and foamy torrents blended.

Now by the source which lab'ring heaves  
The mystic fountain, bubbling, panting,  
10 While gossamer<sup>o</sup> its net-work weaves,  
Adown the blue lawn slanting!  
I'll mark thy *sunny dome*, and view  
Thy *caves of ice*, thy fields of dew!  
Thy ever-blooming mead, whose flow'r  
15 Waves to the cold breath of the moonlight hour!  
Or when the day-star, peering bright  
On the grey wing of parting night;  
While more than vegetating pow'r  
Throbs grateful to the burning hour,  
20 As summer's whisper'd sighs unfold  
Her million, million buds of gold;  
Then will I climb the breezy bounds,  
Of thy new Paradise extended,  
And listen to the distant sounds  
25 Of winds, and foamy torrents blended!

Spirit divine! with thee I'll trace  
Imagination's boundless space!  
With thee, beneath thy *sunny dome*,

30 I'll listen to the minstrel's lay,  
Hymning the gradual close of day;  
In *caves of ice* enchanted roam,  
Where on the glitt'ring entrance plays  
The moon's-beam with its silv'ry rays;  
Or, when the glassy stream,  
35 That through the deep dell flows,  
Flashes the noon's hot beam;  
The noon's hot beam, that midway shows  
Thy flaming temple, studded o'er  
With all Peruvia's<sup>o</sup> lustrous store!  
40 There will I trace the circling bounds  
Of thy new Paradise extended!  
And listen to the awful sounds,  
Of winds, and foamy torrents blended!

45 And now I'll pause to catch the moan  
Of distant breezes, cavern-pent;  
Now, ere the twilight tints are flown,  
Purpling the landscape, far and wide,  
On the dark promontory's side  
I'll gather wild flow'rs, dew besprent,<sup>o</sup>  
50 And weave a crown for thee,  
Genius of Heav'n-taught poesy!  
While, op'ning to my wond'ring eyes,  
Thou bidst a new creation rise,  
I'll raptur'd trace the circling bounds  
55 Of thy rich Paradise extended,  
And listen to the varying sounds  
Of winds, and foaming torrents blended.

60 And now, with lofty tones inviting,  
Thy nymph, her dulcimer swift smiting,  
Shall wake me in ecstatic measures!  
Far, far remov'd from mortal pleasures!  
In cadence rich, in cadence strong,

Proving the wondrous witcheries of song!  
I hear her voice! thy *sunny dome*,  
65 Thy *caves of ice*, aloud repeat,  
Vibrations, madd'ning sweet,  
Calling the visionary wand'rer home.  
She sings of thee, O favor'd child  
70 Of *minstrelsy*, sublimely wild!  
Of thee, whose soul can feel the tone  
Which gives to airy dreams *a magic* all thy own!

Oct. 1800

1801

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This poem is a tribute to, and running commentary on, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which Robinson read in manuscript (Coleridge drafted it in 1797 but did not publish it until 1816).[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *filmy cobweb*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Peru's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sprinkled*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Savage of Aveyron<sup>1</sup>

'Twas in the mazes of a wood,  
The lonely wood of AVEYRON,  
I heard a melancholy tone:—  
It seem'd to freeze my blood!  
A torrent near was flowing fast,  
5 And hollow was the midnight blast  
As o'er the leafless woods it past,  
While terror-fraught I stood!  
O! mazy woods of AVEYRON!  
O! wilds of dreary solitude!  
10 Amid thy thorny alleys rude  
I thought myself alone!  
I thought no living thing could be  
So weary of the world as me,—  
While on my winding path the pale moon shone.  
15

Sometimes the tone was loud and sad,  
And sometimes dulcet, faint, and slow;  
And then a tone of frantic woe:  
It almost made me mad.  
The burthen was "Alone! alone!"  
20 And then the heart did feebly groan;—  
Then suddenly a cheerful tone  
Proclaim'd a spirit glad!  
O! mazy woods of AVEYRON!  
O! wilds of dreary solitude!  
25 Amid your thorny alleys rude  
I wish'd myself—a traveller alone.

"Alone!" I heard the wild boy say,—  
And swift he climb'd a blasted oak:

30 And there, while morning's herald woke,  
He watch'd the opening day.  
Yet dark and sunken was his eye,  
Like a lorn<sup>o</sup> maniac's, wild and shy,  
And scowling like a winter sky,  
Without one beaming ray!  
35 Then, mazy woods of AVEYRON!  
Then, wilds of dreary solitude!  
Amid thy thorny alleys rude  
I sigh'd to be—a traveller alone.

"*Alone, alone!*" I heard him shriek,  
40 'Twas like the shriek of dying man!  
And then to mutter he began,—  
But, O! *he could not speak!*  
I saw him point to Heav'n, and sigh,  
The big drop trembl'd in his eye;  
45 And slowly from the yellow sky,  
I saw the pale morn break.  
I saw the woods of AVEYRON.  
Their wilds of dreary solitude:  
I mark'd their thorny alleys rude,  
50 And wish'd to be—a traveller alone!

His hair was long and black, and he  
From infancy *alone* had been:  
For since his fifth year he had seen,  
None mark'd his destiny!  
55 No mortal ear had heard his groan,  
For him no beam of Hope had shone:  
While sad he sigh'd—"alone, alone!"  
Beneath the blasted tree.  
And then, O! woods of AVEYRON,  
60 O! wilds of dreary solitude,  
Amid your thorny alleys rude  
I thought myself a traveller—alone.

And now upon the blasted tree  
He carv'd *three* notches, broad and long,  
65 And all the while he sang a song—  
Of nature's melody!  
And though of words he nothing knew,  
And, though his dulcet tones were few,  
Across the yielding bark he drew,  
70 Deep sighing, notches THREE.  
O! mazy woods of AVEYRON,  
O! wilds of dreary solitude,  
Amid your thorny alleys rude  
Upon this BLASTED OAK no sun beam shone!  
75

And now he pointed one, two, three;  
Again he shriek'd with wild dismay;  
And now he paced the thorny way,  
Quitting the blasted tree.  
It was a dark December morn,  
80 The dew was frozen on the thorn:  
But to a wretch so sad, so lorn,  
All days alike would be!  
Yet, mazy woods of AVEYRON,  
Yet, wilds of dreary solitude,  
85 Amid your frosty alleys rude  
I wish'd to be—a traveller alone.

He follow'd me along the wood  
To a small grot<sup>o</sup> his hands had made,  
Deep in a black rock's sullen shade,  
90 Beside a tumbling flood.  
Upon the earth I saw him spread  
Of wither'd leaves a narrow bed,  
Yellow as gold, and streak'd with red,  
They look'd like streaks of blood!  
95 Pull'd from the woods of AVEYRON,

And scatter'd o'er the solitude  
By midnight whirlwinds strong and rude,  
To pillow the scorch'd brain that throbb'd alone.

100 Wild berries were his winter food,  
With them his sallow lip was dy'd;  
On chestnuts wild he fed beside,  
Steep'd in the foamy flood.  
Chequer'd with scars his breast was seen,  
105 Wounds streaming fresh with anguish keen,  
And marks where other wounds had been  
Torn by the brambles rude.  
Such was the boy of AVEYRON,  
The tenant of that solitude,  
Where still, by misery unsubdued,  
110 He wander'd *nine long winters*, all alone.

Before the step of his rude throne,  
The *squirrel* sported, tame and gay;  
The *dormouse* slept its life away,  
Nor heard his midnight groan.  
115 About his form a garb he wore,  
Ragged it was, and mark'd with gore,  
And yet, where'er 'twas folded o'er,  
Full many a spangle shone!  
Like little stars, O! AVEYRON,  
120 They gleam'd amid thy solitude;  
Or like, along thy alleys rude,  
The summer dew-drops sparkling in the sun.

It once had been a lady's vest,<sup>o</sup>  
125 White as the whitest mountain's snow,  
Till ruffian hands had taught to flow  
The fountain of her breast!  
Remembrance bade the WILD BOY trace  
Her beauteous form, her angel face,

130 Her eye that beam'd with Heavenly grace.  
Her fainting voice that blest,—  
When in the woods of AVEYRON,  
Deep in their deepest solitude,  
Three barb'rous ruffians shed her blood,  
135 And mock'd, with cruel taunts, her dying groan.

Remembrance trac'd the summer bright,  
When all the trees were fresh and green,  
When lost, the alleys long between,  
The lady past the night:  
140 She past the night, bewilder'd wild,  
She past it with her fearless child,  
Who raised his little arms, and smil'd  
To see the morning light.  
While in the woods of AVEYRON,  
Beneath the broad oak's canopy.  
145 She mark'd aghast the RUFFIANS THREE,  
Waiting to seize the traveller alone!

Beneath the broad oak's canopy  
The lovely lady's bones were laid;  
But since that hour no breeze has play'd  
150 About the blasted tree!  
The leaves all wither'd ere the sun  
His next day's rapid course had run,  
And ere the summer day was done  
It winter seem'd to be:  
155 And still: O! woods of AVEYRON,  
Amid thy dreary solitude  
The oak a sapless trunk has stood,  
To mark the spot where MURDER foul was done!

From HER the WILD BOY learn'd "ALONE,"  
160 She tried to say, *my babe will die!*  
But angels caught her parting sigh,



The BABE her *dying tone*.  
 And from that hour the BOY has been  
 Lord of the solitary scene,  
 165 Wand'ring the dreary shades between,  
 Making his dismal moan!  
 Till, mazy woods of AVEYRON,  
 Dark wilds of dreary solitude,  
 Amid your thorny alleys rude  
 170 I thought myself alone.  
 And could a wretch more wretched be,  
 More wild, or fancy-fraught than he,  
 Whose melancholy tale would pierce AN HEART OF  
 STONE.

1801

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

In remarks prefacing this poem on its first publication in the *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson*, Robinson's daughter and posthumous editor explained that her mother, then in her final illness, wrote it after reading "various accounts of a SAVAGE BOY, lately discovered in the *Forest of Aveyron* [in southern France] and said then to be existing in Paris. Frequent instances of this kind have occurred in the history of Man, and conjecture has almost uniformly been bewildered respecting the origin of such figures. In countries where BANDITTI have been known to reside, imagination may be allowed the exercise of its powers; and Reason may ruminate on the possibility, as well as the probability, of such an interesting history as that of THE SAVAGE OF AVEYRON."

In 1799 hunters at last captured this feral boy, who for several years had been spotted living alone in the woods, subsisting on acorns and roots. He appeared at that point to be about twelve years old. Efforts to educate Victor, as he came to

be called, to teach him speech and attach him to social life, began soon after. Largely unsuccessful, these efforts were nevertheless watched closely, in the hope that they would resolve longstanding controversies about the boundaries and potential of human nature. The mystery of Victor's origins was never solved. He died, still an inmate of the Paris Institution for the Deaf and Mute, in 1828.

[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *forlorn*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cave, grotto*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *robe, gown*[Return to reference °](#)

# **WILLIAM BLAKE**

## **1757–1827**

What William Blake called his "Spiritual Life" was as varied, free, and dramatic as his "Corporeal Life" was simple, limited, and unadventurous. His father was a London tradesman. His only formal education was in art: at the age of ten he entered a drawing school, and later he studied for a time at the school of the Royal Academy of Arts. At fourteen he entered an apprenticeship for seven years to a well-known engraver, James Basire, and began reading widely in his free time and trying his hand at poetry. At twenty-four he married Catherine Boucher, daughter of a market gardener. She was then illiterate, but Blake taught her to read and to help him in his engraving and printing. In the early and somewhat sentimentalized biographies, Catherine is represented as an ideal wife for an unorthodox and impecunious genius. Blake, however, must have been a trying domestic partner, and his vehement attacks on the torment caused by a possessive, jealous female will, which reached their height in 1793 and remained prominent in his writings for another decade, probably reflect a troubled period at home. The couple was childless.

The Blakes for a time enjoyed a moderate prosperity while Blake gave drawing lessons, illustrated books, and engraved designs made by other artists. When the demand for his work slackened, Blake in 1800 moved to a cottage at Felpham, on the Sussex seacoast, to take advantage of the patronage of the wealthy amateur of the arts

and biographer William Hayley (also a supporter of Charlotte Smith), who with the best of narrow intentions tried to transform Blake into a conventional artist and breadwinner. But the caged eagle soon rebelled. Hayley, Blake wrote, "is the Enemy of my Spiritual Life while he pretends to be the Friend of my Corporeal."

At Felpham in 1803 occurred an event that left a permanent mark on Blake's mind and art—an altercation with one John Schofield, a private in the Royal Dragoons. Blake ordered the soldier out of his garden and, when Schofield replied with threats and curses against Blake and his wife, pushed him the fifty yards to the inn where he was quartered. Schofield brought charges that Blake had uttered seditious statements about king and country. Because England was at war with France, sedition was a hanging offense. Blake was acquitted—an event, according to a newspaper account, "which so gratified the auditory that the court was . . . thrown into an uproar by their noisy exultations." Nevertheless Schofield, his fellow soldier Cock, and other participants in the trial haunted Blake's imagination and were enlarged to demonic characters who play a sinister role in *Jerusalem*. The event exacerbated Blake's sense that ominous forces were at work in the contemporary world and led him to complicate the symbolic and allusive style by which he veiled the radical religious, moral, and political opinions that he expressed in his poems.

The dominant literary and artistic fashion of Blake's youth involved the notion that the future of British culture would involve the recovery, through archaeology as well as literary history, of an all but lost past. As an apprentice engraver who learned to draw by sketching the medieval monuments of London churches, Blake began his artistic career in the thick of that antiquarianism. It also informs his early lyric poetry. *Poetical Sketches*, published when he was twenty-six, suggests Blake's affinities with a group of later eighteenth-century writers that includes Thomas Warton, poet and student of Middle English romance and Elizabethan verse; Thomas Gray, translator from Old Icelandic and Welsh and author, in 1757, of "The Bard," a poem about the English conquest of Wales; Thomas

Percy, the editor of the ballad collection *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765); and James Macpherson, who came before the public in the 1760s claiming to be the translator of the epic verse of a third-century Gaelic bard named Ossian. Like these figures, Blake located the sources of poetic inspiration in an archaic native tradition that, according to the prevailing view of national history, had ended up eclipsed after the seventeenth century, when French court culture, manners, and morals began their cultural ascendancy. Even in their orientation to a visionary culture, the bards of Blake's later Prophetic Books retain an association with this imagined version of a primitive past.

*Poetical Sketches* was the only book of Blake's to be set in type according to customary methods. In 1788 he began to experiment with relief etching, a method that he called "illuminated printing" (a term associating his works with the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages) and used to produce most of his books of poems. Working directly on a copper plate with pens, brushes, and an acid-resistant medium, he wrote the text in reverse (so that it would print in the normal order) and also drew the illustration; he then etched the plate in acid to eat away the untreated copper and leave the design standing in relief. The pages printed from such plates were colored by hand in watercolors, often by Catherine Blake, and stitched together to make up a volume. This process was laborious and time-consuming, and Blake printed very few copies of his books; for example, of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* only twenty-eight copies (some of them incomplete) are known to exist; of *The Book of Thel*, sixteen; of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, nine; and of *Jerusalem*, five.

To read a Blake poem without the pictures is to miss something important: Blake places words and images in a relationship that is sometimes mutually enlightening and sometimes turbulent, and that relationship is an aspect of the poem's argument.\* In this mode of relief etching, he published *Songs of Innocence* (1789), then added supplementary poems and printed *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). The two groups of poems represent the world as

it is envisioned by what he calls "two contrary states of the human soul."

Gradually Blake's thinking about human history and his experience of life and suffering articulated themselves in the "Giant Forms" and their actions, which came to constitute a complete mythology. As Blake's mythical character Los said, speaking for all imaginative artists, "I must Create a System or be enslaved by another Man's." This coherent but constantly altering and enlarging system composed the subject matter first of Blake's "minor prophecies," completed by 1795, and then of the major prophetic books on which he continued working until about 1820: *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*.

In his sixties Blake gave up poetry to devote himself to pictorial art. In the course of his life, he produced hundreds of paintings and engravings, many of them illustrations for the work of other poets, including a representation of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, a superb set of designs for the Book of Job, and a series of illustrations of Dante, on which he was still hard at work when he died. At the time of his death, Blake was little known as an artist and almost entirely unknown as a poet. In the mid-nineteenth century he acquired a group of admirers among the Pre-Raphaelites, who regarded him as a precursor. Since the mid-1920s Blake has finally come into his own, both in poetry and in painting, as one of the most dedicated, intellectually challenging, and astonishingly original artists. His marked influence ranges from William Butler Yeats, who edited Blake's writings and modeled his own system of mythology on Blake's, to Allen Ginsberg and other Beat writers, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and the graphic novels of the present day.

The explication of Blake's cryptic prophetic books has been the preoccupation of many scholars. Blake wrote them in the persona, or "voice," of "the Bard! / Who Present, Past, & Future sees"—that is, as a British poet who follows Spenser, and especially Milton, in a lineage going back to the prophets of the Bible. "The Nature of my Work," he said, "is Visionary or Imaginative." What Blake meant by the key terms *vision* and *imagination*, however, is often

misinterpreted by taking literally what he, speaking the traditional language of his great predecessors, intended in a figurative sense. "That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot," he declared, "is not worth my care." Blake was a born ironist who enjoyed mystifying his well-meaning but literal-minded friends and who took a defiant pleasure in shocking the dull and complacent "angels" of his day by being deliberately outrageous in representing his work and opinions.

Blake declared that "all he knew was in the Bible" and that "The Old & New Testaments are the Great Code of Art." This is an exaggeration of the truth that all his prophetic writings deal, in various formulations, with some aspects of the overall biblical plot of the creation and the Fall, the history of the generations of humanity in the fallen world, redemption, and the promise of a recovery of Eden and of a New Jerusalem. These events, however, Blake interprets in what he calls "the spiritual sense." For such a procedure he had considerable precedent, not in the neoplatonic and occult thinkers with whom some modern commentators align him, but in the "spiritual" interpreters of the Bible among the radical Protestant sects in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century England. In *The French Revolution*, *America: A Prophecy*, *Europe: A Prophecy*, and the trenchant prophetic satire *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—all of which Blake wrote in the early 1790s while he was an ardent supporter of the French Revolution—he, like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and a number of radical English theologians, represented the contemporary revolution as the purifying violence that, according to biblical prophecy, portended the imminent redemption of humanity and the world. In Blake's later poems Orc, the fiery spirit of violent revolution, gives way as a central personage to Los, the type of the visionary imagination in the fallen world.

### **BLAKE'S MYTHMAKING**

Blake's first attempt to articulate his full myth of humanity's present, past, and future was *The Four Zoas*, begun in 1796 or 1797. A passage from the opening statement of its theme exemplifies the long verse line (what Blake called "the march of long resounding

strong heroic verse”) in which he wrote his Prophetic Books and will serve also to outline the Books’ vision:

Four Mighty Ones are in every Man; a Perfect Unity  
Cannot Exist, but from the Universal Brotherhood of  
Eden,  
The Universal Man. To Whom be Glory Evermore,  
Amen. . . .

Los was the fourth immortal starry one, & in the  
Earth  
Of a bright Universe Empery attended day & night  
Days & nights of revolving joy, Urthona was his  
name

In Eden; in the Auricular Nerves of Human life  
Which is the Earth of Eden, he his Emanations  
propagated. . . .

Daughter of Beulah, Sing  
His fall into Division & his Resurrection to Unity.

Blake’s mythical premise, or starting point, is not a transcendent God but the “Universal Man” who is God and who incorporates the cosmos as well. (Blake elsewhere describes this founding image as “the Human Form Divine” and names him “Albion.”) The Fall, in this myth, is not the fall of humanity away from God but a falling apart of primal people, a “fall into Division.” In this event the original sin is what Blake calls “Selfhood,” the attempt of an isolated part to be self-sufficient. The breakup of the all-inclusive Universal Man in Eden into exiled parts, it is evident, serves to identify the Fall with the creation—the creation not only of man and of nature as we ordinarily know them but also of a separate sky god who is alien from humanity. Universal Man divides first into the “Four Mighty Ones” who are the Zoas, or chief powers and component aspects of humanity, and these in turn divide sexually into male Spectres and female Emanations. (Thus in the quoted passage the Zoa known in the unfallen state of Eden as Urthona, the imaginative power, separates into the form of Los in the fallen world.) In addition to



Eden there are three successively lower “states” of being in the fallen world, which Blake calls Beulah (a pastoral condition of easy and relaxed innocence, without clash of “contraries”), Generation (the realm of common human experience, suffering, and conflicting contraries), and Ulro (Blake’s hell, the lowest state, or limit, of bleak rationality, tyranny, static negation, and isolated Selfhood). The fallen world moves through the cycles of its history, successively approaching and falling away from redemption, until, by the agency of the Redeemer (who is equated with the human imagination and is most potently operative in the prophetic poet), it will culminate in an apocalypse. In terms of his controlling image of the Universal Man, Blake describes this apocalypse as a return to the original, undivided condition, “his Resurrection to Unity.”

What is confusing to many readers is that Blake alternates this representation of the Fall (as a fragmentation of the one Primal Man into separate parts) with a different kind of representation, in terms of two sharply opposed ways of seeing the universe. In this latter mode the Fall is a catastrophic change from imaginative insight (which sees the cosmos as unified and humanized) to sight by the physical eye (which sees the cosmos as a multitude of isolated individuals in an inhuman and alien nature). In terms of this distinction, the apocalypse toward which Blake as imaginative artist strives unceasingly will enable men and women once again to envision all beings as participant in the individual life that he calls “the Universal Brotherhood of Eden”—that is, a humanized world in which all individuals, in familial union, can feel at home.

The text for Blake’s writings is that of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (rev. ed., 1982), with the exception of *America: A Prophecy*, for which the text is *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*, 2nd ed., edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (2008). Blake’s erratic spelling and punctuation have been altered when the original form might mislead the reader. The editors are grateful for the expert advice of Joseph Viscomi, Robert Essick, and Alexander S. Gourelay in editing the selections from Blake.

## Endnotes

- Note \*: Readers who want to explore Blake's artwork in greater depth will find much to examine at the Blake Archive (<https://blakearchive.org>).[Return to reference \\*](#)

# **All Religions Are One<sup>1</sup>**

## ***The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness<sup>2</sup>***

The Argument. As the true method of knowledge is experiment the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences. This faculty I treat of.

PRINCIPLE 1<sup>st</sup>. That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. Likewise that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius, which by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit & Demon.

PRINCIPLE 2<sup>d</sup>. As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius.

PRINCIPLE 3<sup>d</sup>. No man can think write or speak from his heart, but he must intend truth. Thus all sects of Philosophy are from the Poetic Genius, adapted to the weaknesses of every individual.

PRINCIPLE 4. As none by travelling over known lands can find out the unknown, So from already acquired knowledge Man could not acquire more. Therefore an universal Poetic Genius exists.

PRINCIPLE 5. The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation's different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is everywhere call'd the Spirit of Prophecy.

PRINCIPLE 6. The Jewish & Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius. This is necessary from the confined nature of bodily sensation.

PRINCIPLE 7<sup>th</sup>. As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various), So all Religions & as all similars have one source.

The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

1788

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1:

This and the following two selections are early illuminated works, probably etched in 1788. They are directed both against 18th-century Deism, or “natural religion” (which bases its religious tenets not on scriptural revelation but on evidences of God in the natural or “organic” world), and against Christian orthodoxy, whose creed is based on a particular Scripture. In this selection Blake ironically accepts the Deistic view that all particular religions are variants of the one true religion but rejects the Deists’ “Argument” that this religion is grounded on reasoning from sense experience. He attributes the one religion instead to the innate possession by

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Applied in the Gospels (for example, Matthew 3:3) to John the Baptist, regarded as fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 39:3. Blake applies the phrase to himself, as a later prophetic voice in an alien time. [Return to reference 2](#)

# There Is No Natural Religion<sup>1</sup>

[a]

The Argument. Man has no notion of moral fitness but from Education. Naturally he is only a natural organ subject to Sense.

I. Man cannot naturally Perceive but through his natural or bodily organs.

II. Man by his reasoning power can only compare & judge of what he has already perceived.

III. From a perception of only 3 senses or 3 elements none could deduce a fourth or fifth.

IV. None could have other than natural or organic thoughts if he had none but organic perceptions.

V. Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceived.

VI. The desires & perceptions of man, untaught by any thing but organs of sense, must be limited to objects of sense.

Conclusion. If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.

1788

## Endnotes

- Note 1: In this selection Blake presents his version of English empiricism, which derives all mental content (including the evidences from which, in "natural religion," reason is held to prove the existence of God) from perceptions by the physical senses. [Return to reference 1](#)

# There Is No Natural Religion<sup>1</sup>

[*b*]

I. Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover.

II. Reason, or the ratio<sup>2</sup> of all we have already known, is not the same that it shall be when we know more.

[III lacking]

IV. The bounded is loathed by its possessor. The same dull round even of a universe would soon become a mill with complicated wheels.

V. If the many become the same as the few when possess'd, More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul. Less than All cannot satisfy Man.

VI. If any could desire what he is incapable of possessing, despair must be his eternal lot.

VII. The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite.

Application. He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only.

Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is.

1788

## Endnotes

- Note 1: In this third document Blake presents his assertions (in opposition to those in the preceding tract) that knowledge is not limited to the physical senses, but is as unbounded as the infinite desires of humankind and its godlike capacity for infinite vision. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: In Latin *ratio* signifies both “reason” and “calculation.” Blake applies the term derogatorily to the 18th-century concept of reason as a calculating faculty whose operations are limited to sense perceptions. [Return to reference 2](#)

# ***FROM SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE***<sup>[1](#)</sup>

## **SHEWING THE TWO CONTRARY STATES OF THE HUMAN SOUL**

### **Endnotes**

- Note 1:  
*Songs of Innocence* was etched in 1789, and in 1794 was combined with additional poems under the title *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; this collection was reprinted at various later times with varying arrangements of the poems. In his songs of innocence Blake assumes the stance that he is writing “happy songs / Every child may joy to hear,” but they do not all depict an innocent and happy world; many of them incorporate injustice, evil, and suffering. These aspects of the fallen world, however, are represented as they appear to a “state” of the human soul that Blake calls “innocence” and that he expresses in a simple pastoral language, in the  
[Return to reference 1](#)



***FROM* SONGS OF INNOCENCE**

## **Introduction**

Piping down the valleys wild  
Piping songs of pleasant glee  
On a cloud I saw a child,  
And he laughing said to me,



Separate title page for *Songs of Innocence* (1789),  
*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, plate 3,  
copy Y, ca. 1801.

Piper pipe that song again—  
So I piped, he wept to hear.

10       Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe  
Sing thy songs of happy chear;  
So I sung the same again  
While he wept with joy to hear.

15       Piper sit thee down and write  
In a book that all may read—  
So he vanish'd from my sight.  
And I pluck'd a hollow reed,

20       And I made a rural pen,  
And I stain'd the water clear,  
And I wrote my happy songs  
Every child may joy to hear.

# The Ecchoing Green

The Sun does arise,  
And make happy the skies.  
The merry bells ring  
To welcome the Spring.  
5 The sky-lark and thrush,  
The birds of the bush,  
Sing louder around,  
To the bells' chearful sound.  
While our sports shall be seen  
10 On the Ecchoing Green.

Old John with white hair  
Does laugh away care,  
Sitting under the oak,  
Among the old folk.  
15 They laugh at our play,  
And soon they all say:  
Such, such were the joys.  
When we all, girls & boys,  
In our youth-time were seen,  
20 On the Ecchoing Green.

Till the little ones weary  
No more can be merry  
The sun does descend,  
And our sports have an end:  
25 Round the laps of their mothers,  
Many sisters and brothers,  
Like birds in their nest,  
Are ready for rest;  
And sport no more seen,



# The Lamb<sup>1</sup>

Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed,  
By the stream & o'er the mead;  
5 Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing wooly bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice!  
Little Lamb who made thee?  
10 Dost thou know who made thee?  
Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!  
He is callèd by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb;  
He is meek & he is mild,  
15 He became a little child;  
I a child & thou a lamb,  
We are callèd by his name.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.  
20 Little Lamb God bless thee.

1789

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The opening of this poem mimes the form of the catechistic questions and answers customarily used for children's religious instruction. [Return to reference 1](#)

# The Little Black Boy

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;  
White as an angel is the English child,  
But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

5      My mother taught me underneath a tree,  
And sitting down before the heat of day,  
She took me on her lap and kissèd me,  
And pointing to the east, began to say:

10      Look on the rising sun: there God does live  
And gives his light, and gives his heat away;  
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
Comfort in morning, joy in the noon day.

15      And we are put on earth a little space,  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,  
And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face  
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

20      For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,  
The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice,  
Saying: Come out from the grove, my love & care,  
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Thus did my mother say, and kissèd me;  
And thus I say to little English boy:  
When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

25      I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear  
To lean in joy upon our father's knee.



And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him, and he will then love me.

1789

# The Chimney Sweeper

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!<sup>1</sup>  
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

5      There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head  
That curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd, so I said,  
Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's  
bare,  
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

10      And so he was quiet, & that very night,  
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,  
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black;

15      And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he open'd the coffins & set them all free;  
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,  
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

20      Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,  
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.  
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,  
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark  
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.  
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;  
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The child's lisping attempt at the chimney sweeper's street cry, "Sweep! Sweep!"[Return to reference 1](#)

## The Divine Image

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
All pray in their distress,  
And to these virtues of delight  
Return their thankfulness.

5 For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
Is God, our father dear:  
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
Is Man, his child and care.

10 For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity, a human face,  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.

15 Then every man of every clime,  
That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine,  
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

20 And all must love the human form,  
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.  
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell,  
There God is dwelling too.

# Holy Thursday<sup>1</sup>

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,  
The children walking two & two, in red & blue &  
green;

Grey headed beades<sup>2</sup> walkd before with wands as  
white as snow,  
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames'  
waters flow.

5 O what a multitude they seemd, these flowers of  
London town!  
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their  
own.  
The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of  
lambs,  
Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent  
hands.

10 Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the  
voice of song,  
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven  
among.  
Beneath them sit the agèd men, wise guardians of  
the poor;  
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your  
door.<sup>3</sup>

ca. 1784

1789

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A special day during the Easter season when the poor (frequently orphaned) children of the charity schools of London—sometimes as many as 6,000—marched in a procession to a service at St. Paul’s Cathedral.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Lower church officers, one of whose duties is to keep order.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Compare Hebrews 13:2: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”[Return to reference 3](#)

## Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
And laughing is heard on the hill,  
My heart is at rest within my breast  
And everything else is still.

5 Then come home my children, the sun is gone down  
And the dews of night arise;  
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away  
Till the morning appears in the skies.

10 No, no, let us play, for it is yet day  
And we cannot go to sleep;  
Besides, in the sky, the little birds fly  
And the hills are all covered with sheep.

15 Well, well, go & play till the light fades away  
And then go home to bed.  
The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd  
And all the hills echoed.

ca. 1784

1789

## Infant Joy

I have no name,  
I am but two days old.  
What shall I call thee?  
I happy am,  
Joy is my name.  
5 Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!  
Sweet joy but two days old,  
Sweet joy I call thee;  
Thou dost smile,  
10 I sing the while—  
Sweet joy befall thee.



## On Anothers Sorrow

Can I see anothers woe,  
And not be in sorrow too.  
Can I see anothers grief,  
And not seek for kind relief.

5 Can I see a falling tear,  
And not feel my sorrows share,  
Can a father see his child,  
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd.

10 Can a mother sit and hear,  
An infant groan an infant fear—  
No no never can it be.  
Never never can it be.

15 And can he who smiles on all  
Hear the wren with sorrows small,  
Hear the small birds grief & care  
Hear the woes that infants bear—

20 And not sit beside the nest  
Pouring pity in their breast,  
And not sit the cradle near  
Weeping tear on infants tear.

And not sit both night & day,  
Wiping all our tears away.  
O! no never can it be.  
Never never can it be.

25 He doth give his joy to all.  
He becomes an infant small.

He becomes a man of woe  
He doth feel the sorrow too.

30 Think not, thou canst sigh a sigh,  
And thy maker is not by.  
Think not, thou canst weep a tear,  
And thy maker is not near.

35 O! he gives to us his joy,  
That our grief he may destroy  
Till our grief is fled & gone  
He doth sit by us and moan

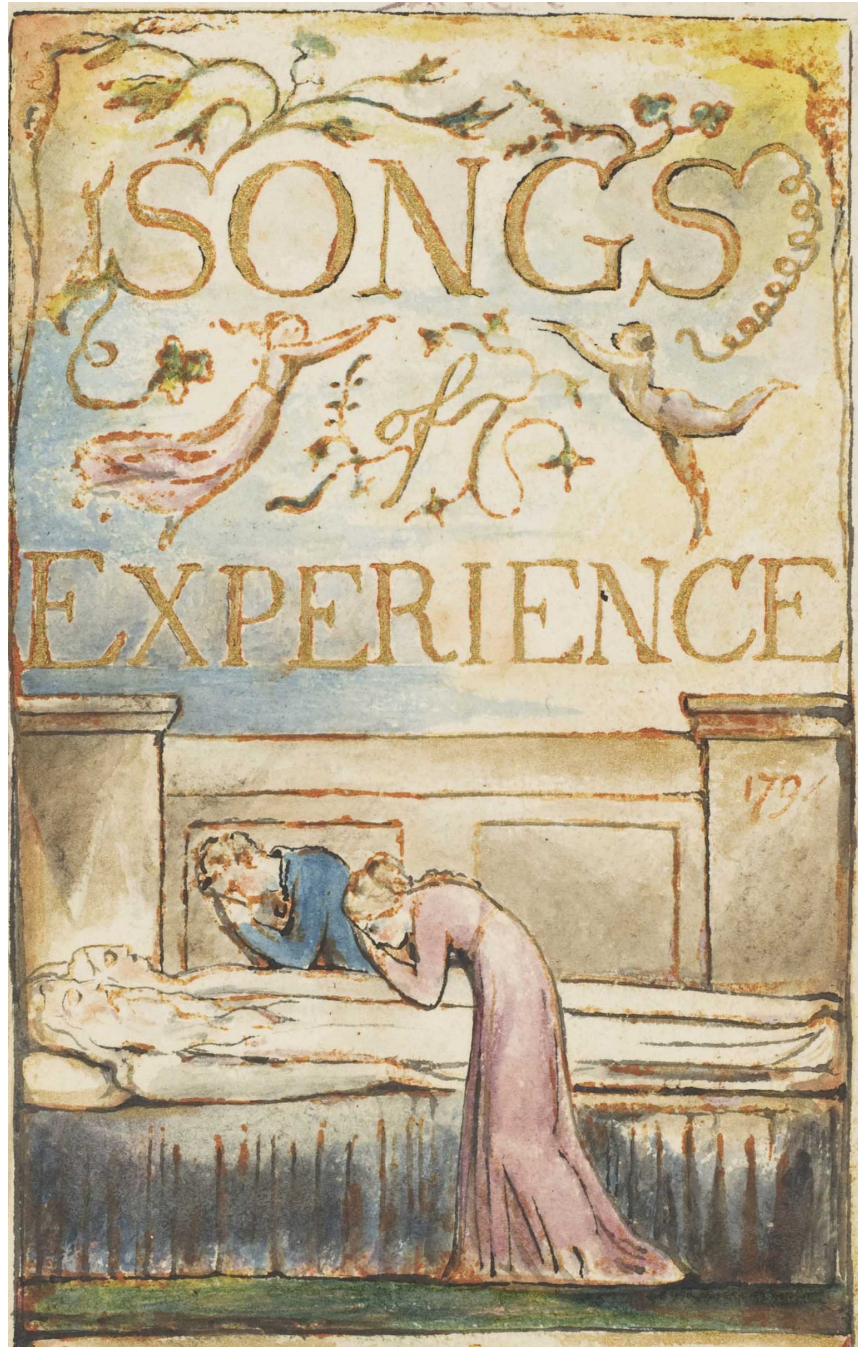
## ***FROM* SONGS OF EXPERIENCE**

## Introduction

Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Who Present, Past, & Future sees;  
Whose ears have heard  
The Holy Word  
5 That walk'd among the ancient trees;<sup>1</sup>

Calling the lapsèd Soul<sup>2</sup>  
And weeping in the evening dew,  
That might controll<sup>3</sup>  
The starry pole,  
10 And fallen, fallen light renew!

O Earth, O Earth, return!  
Arise from out the dewy grass;



Separate title page for *Songs of Experience* (1794)  
*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, plate 29,  
copy Y, ca. 1801.

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Night is worn,  
And the morn  
Rises from the slumberous mass.

15 Turn away no more;  
Why wilt thou turn away?  
The starry floor  
The watry shore<sup>4</sup>  
20 Is giv'n thee till the break of day.

1794

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Genesis 3:8: "And [Adam and Eve] heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." "The Bard," or poet-prophet, whose imagination is not bound by time, has heard the voice of the Lord in Eden. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The syntax leaves it ambiguous whether it is "the Bard" or "the Holy Word" who calls to the fallen ("lapsed") soul and to the fallen earth to stop the natural cycle of light and darkness. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The likely syntax is that "Soul" is the subject of "might controll." [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In Blake's recurrent symbolism the starry sky ("floor") signifies rigid rational order and the sea signifies chaos. [Return to reference 4](#)

## Earth's Answer<sup>1</sup>

Earth rais'd up her head,  
From the darkness dread & drear.  
Her light fled:  
Stony dread!  
And her locks cover'd with grey despair.  
5  
  
Prison'd on watry shore  
Starry Jealousy does keep my den,  
Cold and hoar  
Weeping o'er  
I hear the Father of the ancient men.<sup>2</sup>  
10  
  
Selfish father of men,  
Cruel, jealous, selfish fear!  
Can delight  
Chain'd in night  
The virgins of youth and morning bear?  
15  
  
Does spring hide its joy  
When buds and blossoms grow?  
Does the sower  
Sow by night,  
Or the plowman in darkness plow?  
20  
  
Break this heavy chain  
That does freeze my bones around;  
Selfish! vain!  
Eternal bane!  
That free Love with bondage bound.  
25

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The Earth explains why she, the natural world, cannot by her unaided endeavors renew the fallen light.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: This is the character that Blake later named “Urizen” in his prophetic works. He is the tyrant who binds the mind to the natural world and also imposes a moral bondage on sexual desire and other modes of human energy.[Return to reference 2](#)



## The Clod & the Pebble

Love seeketh not Itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care;  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.

5        So sang a little Clod of Clay,  
Trodden with the cattle's feet;  
But a Pebble of the brook,  
Warbled out these metres meet:

10       Love seeketh only Self to please,  
To bind another to its delight;  
Joys in another's loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.

## Holy Thursday

Is this a holy thing to see,  
In a rich and fruitful land,  
Babes reduced to misery,  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

5      Is that trembling cry a song?  
Can it be a song of joy?  
And so many children poor?  
It is a land of poverty!

10     And their sun does never shine,  
And their fields are bleak & bare,  
And their ways are fill'd with thorns;  
It is eternal winter there.

15     For where-e'er the sun does shine,  
And where-e'er the rain does fall,  
Babe can never hunger there,  
Nor poverty the mind appall.

# The Chimney Sweeper

A little black thing among the snow  
Crying 'weep, 'weep, in notes of woe!  
Where are thy father & mother? say?  
They are both gone up to the church to pray.

5      Because I was happy upon the heath,  
And smil'd among the winter's snow;  
They clothed me in the clothes of death,  
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

10     And because I am happy, & dance & sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery.

1790–92

1794

## Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
And whisperings are in the dale,  
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,  
My face turns green and pale.

5 Then come home my children, the sun is gone down  
And the dews of night arise;  
Your spring & your day are wasted in play,  
And your winter and night in disguise.

1794

## The Sick Rose

O Rose, thou art sick.  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm

5 Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy,  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

1794

# The Fly

Little Fly  
Thy summer's play  
My thoughtless hand  
Has brush'd away

5      Am not I  
A fly like thee?  
Or art not thou  
A man like me?

10     For I dance  
And drink & sing,  
Till some blind hand  
Shall brush my wing.

15     If thought is life  
And strength & breath,  
And the want  
Of thought is death;

20     Then am I  
A happy fly,  
If I live,  
Or if I die.



# The Tyger.

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies,  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp,  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears:  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?





"The Tyger," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, plate 42,  
copy Y, ca. 1801.

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In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

5      In what distant deeps or skies  
        Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
        On what wings dare he aspire?  
        What the hand dare seize the fire?

10     And what shoulder, & what art,  
        Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
        And when thy heart began to beat,  
        What dread hand? & what dread feet?

15     What the hammer? what the chain?  
        In what furnace was thy brain?  
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        Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

20     When the stars threw down their spears<sup>1</sup>  
        And water'd heaven with their tears,  
        Did he smile his work to see?  
        Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

1790–92

1794

## Endnotes

- Note 1: “Threw down” is ambiguous and may signify that the stars either “surrendered” or “hurled down” their spears.[Return to reference 1](#)

## **My Pretty Rose Tree**

A flower was offerd to me;  
Such a flower as May never bore,  
But I said, I've a Pretty Rose-tree,  
And I passed the sweet flower o'er.

5      Then I went to my Pretty Rose-tree,  
To tend her by day and by night.  
But my Rose turnd away with jealousy,  
And her thorns were my only delight.

1794

## Ah! Sun-flower

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,  
Who countest the steps of the Sun,  
Seeking after that sweet golden clime  
Where the traveller's journey is done;

5      Where the Youth pined away with desire,  
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,  
Arise from their graves and aspire,  
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

1794

## The Garden of Love

I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I never had seen:  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.

5 And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And Thou shalt not writ over the door;  
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,  
That so many sweet flowers bore,

10 And I saw it was filled with graves,  
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;  
And Priests in black gowns were walking their  
rounds,  
And binding with briars my joys & desires.

# London

I wander thro' each charter'd<sup>1</sup> street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

5 In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,<sup>2</sup>  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear:

10 How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

15 But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear,<sup>3</sup>  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.<sup>4</sup>



## LONDON

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
Every blackning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse



"London," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, plate 46, copy Y, ca. 1801.

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## Endnotes

- Note 1: "Given liberty," but also, ironically, "preempted as private property, and rented out."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The various meanings of *ban* are relevant (political and legal prohibition, curse, public condemnation) as well as "banns" (marriage proclamation).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Most critics read this line as implying prenatal blindness, resulting from a parent's venereal disease (the "plagues" of line 16) by earlier infection from the harlot.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the older sense: "converts the marriage bed into a bier." Or possibly, because the current sense of the word had also come into use in Blake's day, "converts the marriage coach into a funeral hearse."[Return to reference 4](#)



# The Human Abstract<sup>1</sup>

Pity would be no more,  
If we did not make somebody Poor;  
And Mercy no more could be,  
If all were as happy as we;

5 And mutual fear brings peace,  
Till the selfish loves increase;  
Then Cruelty knits a snare,  
And spreads his baits with care.

10 He sits down with holy fears,  
And waters the ground with tears;  
Then Humility takes its root  
Underneath his foot.

15 Soon spreads the dismal shade  
Of Mystery over his head;  
And the Catterpillar and Fly  
Feed on the Mystery.



"The Human Abstract," *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, plate 47, copy Y, 1825.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,  
Ruddy and sweet to eat;

20

And the Raven his nest has made  
In its thickest shade.

The Gods of the earth and sea,  
Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree,  
But their search was all in vain:  
There grows one in the Human Brain.

1790–92

1794

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The matched contrary to “The Divine Image” in *Songs of Innocence*. The virtues of the earlier poem, “Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,” are now represented as possible marks for exploitation, cruelty, conflict, and hypocritical humility. [Return to reference 1](#)

## Infant Sorrow

My mother groand! my father wept.  
Into the dangerous world I leapt,  
Helpless, naked, piping loud;  
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

5 Struggling in my father's hands,  
Striving against my swadling bands;  
Bound and weary I thought best  
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

1794

## A Poison Tree

I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

5       And I waterd it in fears,  
Night & morning with my tears;  
And I sunnèd it with smiles,  
And with soft deceitful wiles.

10       And it grew both day and night,  
Till it bore an apple bright.  
And my foe beheld it shine,  
And he knew that it was mine,

15       And into my garden stole,  
When the night had veild the pole;  
In the morning glad I see  
My foe outstretchd beneath the tree.

## To Tirzah<sup>1</sup>

Whate'er is Born of Mortal Birth  
Must be consumèd with the Earth  
To rise from Generation free;  
Then what have I to do with thee?<sup>2</sup>

5 The Sexes sprung from Shame & Pride,  
Blow'd<sup>o</sup> in the morn, in evening died;  
But Mercy changd Death into Sleep;  
The Sexes rose to work & weep.

10 Thou, Mother of my Mortal part,  
With cruelty didst mould my Heart,  
And with false self-deceiving tears  
Didst bind my Nostrils, Eyes, & Ears.

15 Didst close my Tongue in senseless clay  
And me to Mortal Life betray.  
The Death of Jesus set me free;  
Then what have I to do with thee?

ca. 1805

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Tirzah was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel and is conceived by Blake in opposition to Jerusalem, capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, whose tribes had been redeemed from captivity. In this poem, which was added to late versions of *Songs of Experience*, Tirzah is represented as the mother—in the realm of material nature and “Generation”—of the mortal body, with its restrictive senses.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Echoing the words of Christ to his mother at the marriage in Cana, John 2:4: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come."[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *blossomed*[Return to reference °](#)

# A Divine Image<sup>1</sup>

Cruelty has a Human Heart  
And Jealousy a Human Face,  
Terror, the Human Form Divine,  
And Secrecy, the Human Dress.

5 The Human Dress is forgèd Iron,  
The Human Form, a fiery Forge,  
The Human Face, a Furnace seal'd,  
The Human Heart, its hungry Gorge.<sup>o</sup>

1790–91

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Blake omitted this poem from all but one copy of *Songs of Experience*, probably because “The Human Abstract” served as a more comprehensive and subtle contrary to “The Divine Image” in *Songs of Innocence*. [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *mouth, stomach* [Return to reference °](#)



**Visions of the Daughters of Albion** This work, dated 1793 on the title page, is one of Blake's early illuminated books, and like his later and longer works is written in what Blake called "the long resounding strong heroic verse" of seven-foot lines. Unlike the timid heroine in Blake's earlier *The Book of Thel*, the virgin Oothoon dares to break through into adult sexuality (symbolized by her plucking a marigold and placing it between her breasts) and sets out joyously to join her lover, Theotormon, whose realm is the Atlantic Ocean. She is stopped and raped by Bromion, who appears as a thunderstorm (1.16–17). The jealous Theotormon, condemning the victim as well as the rapist, binds the two "back to back" in a cave and sits weeping on the threshold. The rest of the work consists of monologues by the three characters, who remain fixed in these postures. Throughout this stage tableau the Daughters of Albion serve as the chorus who, in a recurrent refrain, echo the "woes" and "sighs" of Oothoon, but not her call to rebellion.

This simple drama is densely significant, for as Blake's compressed allusions indicate, the characters, events, and monologues have diverse areas of application. Blake's abrupt opening word, which he etched in very large letters, is *Enslav'd*, and the work as a whole embodies his view that contemporary men, and even more women, in a spiritual parallel to shackled African people, are in bondage to oppressive concepts and codes in all aspects of perception, thought, social institutions, and actions. As indicated by the refrain of the Daughters of Albion (that is, contemporary Englishwomen), Oothoon in one aspect represents the sexual disabilities and slavlike status of all women in a male-dominated society. But as "the soft soul of America" (1.3) she is also the revolutionary nation that had recently won political emancipation, yet continued to tolerate an agricultural system that involved the enslavement of Black people and to acquiesce in the crass economic exploitation of her "soft American plains." At the same time Oothoon is represented in the situation of an enslaved Black female who has been branded, whipped, raped, and impregnated by her master.

Correlatively, the speeches of the boastful Bromion show him to be not only a sexual exploiter of women and a cruel and acquisitive slave owner but also a general proponent of the use of force to achieve mastery in wars, in an oppressive legal system, and in a religious morality based on the fear of hell (4.19–24). Theotormon is represented as even more contemptible. Broken and paralyzed by the prohibitions of a puritanical religion, he denies any possibility of achieving “joys” in this life, despairs of the power of intellect and imagination to improve the human condition and, rationalizing his own incapacity, bewails Oothoon’s daring to think and act other than he does.

Oothoon’s long and passionate oration that concludes the poem (plates 5–8) celebrates a free sexual life for both women and men. Blake, however, uses this open and unpossessive sexuality to typify the realization of all human potentialities and to represent an outgoing altruism, as opposed to an enclosed self-centeredness, “the self-love that envies all.” To such a suspicious egotism, as her allusions indicate, Oothoon attributes the tyranny of uniform moral laws imposed on variable individuals, a rigidly institutional religion, the acquisitiveness that drives the system of commerce, and the property rights in another person that are established by the marriage contract.

Blake’s poem reflects some prominent happenings of the years of its composition, 1791–93. This was not only the time when the revolutionary spirit had moved from America to France with tremendous consequences in England, but also the time of rebellions by enslaved Africans in the Western Hemisphere and of widespread debate in England about the abolition of the slave trade. Blake, while composing the *Visions*, had illustrated the sadistic punishments inflicted on rebellious slaves in his engravings for J. G. Stedman’s *A Narrative, of a Five Years’ Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (see David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, [chapter 10](#)). Blake’s championing of women’s liberation parallels some of the views expressed in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft, whom Blake knew

and admired, and for whom he had illustrated a book the year before.

# Visions of the Daughters of Albion

The Eye sees more than the Heart knows.

PLATE iii<sup>1</sup>

## *The Argument*

I loved Theotormon  
And I was not ashamed  
I trembled in my virgin fears  
And I hid in Leutha's<sup>2</sup> vale!

5

I plucked Leutha's flower,  
And I rose up from the vale;  
But the terrible thunders tore  
My virgin mantle in twain.



Frontispiece, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), plate 1, copy P, ca. 1815

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PLATE 1

***Visions***

ENSLAV'D, the Daughters of Albion weep: a trembling  
lamentation  
Upon their mountains; in their valleys, sighs toward  
America.

For the soft soul of America, Oothoon<sup>3</sup> wandered in  
woe,  
Along the vales of Leutha seeking flowers to comfort  
her;  
5 And thus she spoke to the bright Marygold of Leutha's  
vale:

"Art thou a flower! art thou a nymph! I see thee now  
a flower,  
Now a nymph! I dare not pluck thee from thy dewy  
bed!"

The Golden nymph replied: "Pluck thou my flower  
Oothoon the mild.  
Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet  
delight  
10 Can never pass away." She ceas'd & closd her golden  
shrine.

Then Oothoon pluck'd the flower saying, "I pluck thee  
from thy bed,  
Sweet flower, and put thee here to glow between my  
breasts,  
And thus I turn my face to where my whole soul  
seeks."

Over the waves she went in wing'd exulting swift  
delight;  
15 And over Theotormon's reign took her impetuous  
course.

Bromion rent her with his thunders. On his stormy  
bed  
Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appalld his  
thunders hoarse.

20 Bromion spoke. "Behold this harlot here on Bromion's  
bed,  
And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely  
maid;  
Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy  
north & south:  
Stamp't with my signet<sup>4</sup> are the swarthy children of  
the sun:  
They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the  
scourge:  
Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent.

PLATE 2

Now thou maist marry Bromion's harlot, and protect  
the child  
Of Bromion's rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in  
nine moons' time."<sup>5</sup>  
Then storms rent Theotormon's limbs; he roll'd his  
waves around,  
And folded his black jealous waters round the  
adulterate pair;  
5 Bound back to back in Bromion's caves terror &  
meekness dwell.

At entrance Theotormon sits wearing the threshold  
hard  
With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a  
desart shore

10 The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children  
bought with money,  
That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning  
fires  
Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the  
earth.

Oothoon weeps not: she cannot weep! her tears are  
locked up;  
But she can howl incessant, writhing her soft snowy  
limbs,  
And calling Theotormon's Eagles to prey upon her  
flesh.<sup>6</sup>

15 "I call with holy voice! kings of the sounding air,  
Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect  
The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent  
breast."

The Eagles at her call descend & rend their bleeding  
prey;  
Theotormon severely smiles; her soul reflects the  
smile,  
As the clear spring muddied with feet of beasts grows  
pure & smiles.

20 The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back  
her sighs.

"Why does my Theotormon sit weeping upon the  
threshold,  
And Oothoon hovers by his side, perswading him in  
vain?  
I cry, 'Arise O Theotormon, for the village dog  
Barks at the breaking day, the nightingale has done  
lamenting,



25 The lark does rustle in the ripe corn, and the Eagle  
returns  
From nightly prey, and lifts his golden beak to the  
pure east,  
Shaking the dust from his immortal pinions to awake  
The sun that sleeps too long. Arise my Theotormon, I  
am pure;  
Because the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly  
black.'

30 They told me that the night & day were all that I  
could see;  
They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up,  
And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle,  
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe  
hot burning,  
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.

35 Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye  
In the eastern cloud, <sup>z</sup> instead of night a sickly charnel  
house,  
That Theotormon hears me not! to him the night and  
morn  
Are both alike: a night of sighs, a morning of fresh  
tears;

PLATE 3

And none but Bromion can hear my lamentations.

"With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the  
ravenous hawk?  
With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out  
the expanse?  
With what sense does the bee form cells? have not  
the mouse & frog  
5 Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are their  
habitations

And their pursuits as different as their forms and as  
their joys.

Ask the wild ass why he refuses burdens, and the  
meek camel

Why he loves man; is it because of eye, ear, mouth,  
or skin,

Or breathing nostrils? No, for these the wolf and tyger  
have.

10 Ask the blind worm the secrets of the grave, and why  
her spires

Love to curl round the bones of death; and ask the  
rav'nous snake

Where she gets poison, & the wing'd eagle why he  
loves the sun,

And then tell me the thoughts of man, that have been  
hid of old.<sup>8</sup>

"Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be  
silent,

15 If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon  
me.

How can I be defild when I reflect thy image pure?

Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on, & the soul  
prey'd on by woe,

The new wash'd lamb ting'd with the village smoke, &  
the bright swan

By the red earth of our immortal river:<sup>9</sup> I bathe my  
wings,

20 And I am white and pure to hover round  
Theotormon's breast."

Then Theotormon broke his silence, and he  
answered:

"Tell me what is the night or day to one o'erflowd with  
woe?

Tell me what is a thought? & of what substance is it  
made?  
Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens do joys  
grow?  
25 And in what rivers swim the sorrows? and upon what  
mountains

PLATE 4

Wave shadows of discontent? and in what houses  
dwell the wretched  
Drunken with woe, forgotten, and shut up from cold  
despair?  
"Tell me where dwell the thoughts, forgotten till thou  
call them forth?  
Tell me where dwell the joys of old! & where the  
ancient loves?  
5 And when will they renew again & the night of  
oblivion past?  
That I might traverse times & spaces far remote and  
bring  
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain.  
Where goest thou, O thought? to what remote land is  
thy flight?  
If thou returnest to the present moment of affliction  
10 Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings and dew and  
honey and balm,  
Or poison from the desert wilds, from the eyes of the  
envier?"

Then Bromion said, and shook the cavern with his  
lamentation:

"Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine  
eyes have fruit;

But knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon  
the earth  
To gratify senses unknown? trees beasts and birds  
15 unknown:  
Unknown, not unperciev'd, spread in the infinite  
microscope,  
In places yet unvisited by the voyager, and in worlds  
Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres  
unknown?  
Ah! are there other wars, beside the wars of sword  
and fire?  
And are there other sorrows, beside the sorrows of  
20 poverty?  
And are there other joys, beside the joys of riches and  
ease?  
And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?  
[1](#)  
And is there not eternal fire, and eternal chains?  
To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?"  
Then Oothoon waited silent all the day and all the  
25 night,

PLATE 5

But when the morn arose, her lamentation renewd.  
The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back  
her sighs.  
"O Urizen![2](#) Creator of men! mistaken Demon of  
heaven:  
Thy joys are tears! thy labour vain, to form men to  
thine image.  
How can one joy absorb another? are not different  
5 joys  
Holy, eternal, infinite! and each joy is a Love.

“Does not the great mouth laugh at a gift? & the  
narrow eyelids mock  
At the labour that is above payment? and wilt thou  
take the ape  
For thy councillor? or the dog for a schoolmaster to  
thy children?  
Does he who contemns poverty, and he who turns  
10 with abhorrence  
From usury, feel the same passion, or are they moved  
alike?  
How can the giver of gifts experience the delights of  
the merchant?  
How the industrious citizen the pains of the  
husbandman?  
How different far the fat fed hireling with hollow  
drum,  
15 Who buys whole corn fields into wastes, <sup>3</sup> and sings  
upon the heath:  
How different their eye and ear! how different the  
world to them!  
With what sense does the parson claim the labour of  
the farmer?  
What are his nets & gins<sup>o</sup> & traps? & how does he  
surround him  
With cold floods of abstraction, and with forests of  
solitude,  
20 To build him castles and high spires, where kings &  
priests may dwell?  
Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot,  
is bound  
In spells of law to one she loaths; and must she drag  
the chain  
Of life, in weary lust? must chilling murderous  
thoughts obscure

The clear heaven of her eternal spring? to bear the  
wintry rage  
25 Of a harsh terror, driv'n to madness, bound to hold a  
rod  
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day, & all the  
night  
To turn the wheel of false desire, and longings that  
wake her womb  
To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form  
That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more;  
30 Till the child dwell with one he hates, and do the deed  
he loaths,  
And the impure scourge force his seed into its unripe  
birth  
E'er yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day?<sup>4</sup>

"Does the whale worship at thy footsteps as the  
hungry dog?  
Or does he scent the mountain prey, because his  
nostrils wide  
35 Draw in the ocean? does his eye discern the flying  
cloud  
As the raven's eye? or does he measure the expanse  
like the vulture?  
Does the still spider view the cliffs where eagles hide  
their young?  
Or does the fly rejoice because the harvest is brought  
in?  
Does not the eagle scorn the earth & despise the  
treasures beneath?  
40 But the mole knoweth what is there, & the worm shall  
tell it thee.  
Does not the worm erect a pillar in the mouldering  
church yard,

PLATE 6

And a palace of eternity in the jaws of the hungry  
grave?  
Over his porch these words are written: 'Take thy bliss  
O Man!  
And sweet shall be thy taste & sweet thy infant joys  
renew!'

5 "Infancy, fearless, lustful, happy! nestling for delight  
In laps of pleasure; Innocence! honest, open, seeking  
The vigorous joys of morning light, open to virgin  
bliss,  
Who taught thee modesty, subtil modesty? Child of  
night & sleep,  
When thou awakest wilt thou dissemble all thy secret  
joys,  
Or wert thou not awake when all this mystery was  
disclos'd?  
10 Then com'st thou forth a modest virgin, knowing to  
dissemble,  
With nets found under thy night pillow to catch virgin  
joy,  
And brand it with the name of whore, & sell it in the  
night,  
In silence, ev'n without a whisper, and in seeming  
sleep.<sup>5</sup>  
Religious dreams and holy vespers light thy smoky  
fires;  
15 Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest  
morn.  
And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite  
modesty,  
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious,  
trembling hypocrite?

Then is Oothoon a whore indeed! and all the virgin  
joys  
Of life are harlots, and Theotormon is a sick man's  
dream,  
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness.  
20  
"But Oothoon is not so; a virgin fill'd with virgin  
fancies  
Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty  
appears.  
If in the morning sun I find it, there my eyes are fix'd

PLATE 7

In happy copulation; if in evening mild, wearied with  
work,  
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born  
joy.  
"The moment of desire! the moment of desire! The  
virgin  
That pines for man shall awaken her womb to  
enormous joys  
5 In the secret shadows of her chamber; the youth shut  
up from  
The lustful joy shall forget to generate & create an  
amorous image  
In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his  
silent pillow.<sup>6</sup>  
Are not these the places of religion? the rewards of  
continence?  
The self enjoyings of self denial? Why dost seek  
religion?  
10 Is it because acts are not lovely, that thou seekest  
solitude,



Where the horrible darkness is impressed with  
reflections of desire?

"Father of Jealousy,<sup>7</sup> be thou accursed from the earth!  
Why hast thou taught my Theotormon this accursed  
thing?

Till beauty fades from off my shoulders, darken'd and  
cast out,

15 A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity.

"I cry, Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as  
the mountain wind!

Can that be Love, that drinks another as a sponge  
drinks water?

That clouds with jealousy his nights, with weepings all  
the day,

To spin a web of age around him, grey and hoary!  
dark!

20 Till his eyes sicken at the fruit that hangs before his  
sight.

Such is self-love that envies all! a creeping skeleton  
With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen  
marriage bed.

"But silken nets and traps of adamant<sup>8</sup> will Oothoon  
spread,

And catch for thee girls of mild silver, or of furious  
gold;

25 I'll lie beside thee on a bank & view their wanton play  
In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with Theotormon:

Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born  
beam,

Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e'er with  
jealous cloud

Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish  
blightings bring.

30 "Does the sun walk in glorious raiment on the secret  
floor

PLATE 8

Where the cold miser spreads his gold? or does the  
bright cloud drop  
On his stone threshold? does his eye behold the beam  
that brings  
Expansion to the eye of pity? or will he bind himself  
Beside the ox to thy hard furrow? does not that mild  
beam blot  
5 The bat, the owl, the glowing tyger, and the king of  
night?  
The sea fowl takes the wintry blast for a cov'ring to  
her limbs,  
And the wild snake the pestilence to adorn him with  
gems & gold.  
And trees & birds & beasts & men behold their eternal  
joy.  
Arise you little glancing wings, and sing your infant  
joy!  
10 Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is  
holy!"<sup>9</sup>

Thus every morning wails Oothoon, but Theotormon  
sits  
Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows  
dire.

The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & eccho back  
her sighs.

1791–93

1793

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The plate numbers identify the page, each with its own pictorial design, as originally printed by Blake. These numbers are reproduced here because they are frequently used in references to Blake's writings.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In some poems by Blake, Leutha is represented as a female figure who is beautiful and seductive but treacherous.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The name is adapted by Blake from a character in James Macpherson's pretended translations, in the 1760s, from the ancient British bard Ossian. After her husband goes off to war, Macpherson's Oithona is abducted, raped, and imprisoned by a rejected suitor.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A small seal or stamp. The allusion is to the branding of enslaved people.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Pregnancy enhanced the market value of an enslaved female in America.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The implied parallel is to Zeus's punishment of Prometheus for befriending the human race, by setting an eagle to devour his liver.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The contrast is between the physical sun perceived by the constricted ("inclos'd," line 32) sensible eye and "the breaking day" (line 24) of a new era perceived by Oothoon's liberated vision.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Oothoon implies that "thoughts" (powers of conceiving a liberated life in a better world) are as innate to human beings as instinctual patterns of behavior are to other species of living things.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: "Immortal river": may refer to the "river" that "went out of Eden" (Genesis 2:10). "Red earth": the etymological meaning of the Hebrew name *Adam* (see *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 2.13, p. 150).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The last line of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* proclaims: "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: This is the first occurrence of the name "Urizen" in Blake (the name can be pronounced either as "your reason" or as an

echo of “horizon”). Oothoon’s liberated vision recognizes the error in the way God is conceived in conventional religion.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Probably a compressed allusion both to the wealthy landowner who converts fertile fields into a game preserve and to the army recruiting officer (“with hollow drum”) who strips the land of its agricultural laborers.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The reference is to the begetting of children, both in actual slavery and in the metaphoric slavery of a loveless marriage, from generation to generation.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Oothoon contrasts the natural, innocent sensuality of an infant to the sort of modesty characterizing the adult virgin, a false modesty that, Mary Wollstonecraft had observed in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is “merely a respect for the opinion of the world.”[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Blake is describing masturbation.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, Urizen (5.3), the God who prohibits the satisfaction of human desires.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A legendary stone believed to be unbreakable. (The name is derived from the Greek word for diamond.)[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: This last phrase is also the concluding line of “A Song of Liberty,” appended to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *snares*[Return to reference °](#)

**The Marriage of Heaven and Hell** This, the most immediately accessible of Blake's longer works, is a vigorous, deliberately outrageous, and at times comic onslaught against timidly conventional and self-righteous members of society as well as against stock opinions of orthodox Christian piety and morality. The seeming simplicity of Blake's satiric attitude, however, is deceptive.

Initially, Blake accepts the terminology of standard Christian morality ("what the religious call Good & Evil") but reverses its values. In this conventional use Evil, which is manifested by the class of beings called Devils and which consigns wrongdoers to the orthodox Hell, is everything associated with the body and its desires and consists essentially of energy, abundance, actions, and freedom. Conventional Good, which is manifested by Angels and guarantees its adherents a place in the orthodox Heaven, is associated with the Soul (regarded as entirely separate from the body) and consists of the contrary qualities of reason, restraint, passivity, and prohibition. Blandly adopting these conventional oppositions, Blake elects to assume the diabolic persona—what he calls "the voice of the Devil"—and to utter "Proverbs of Hell."

But this stance is only a first stage in Blake's complex irony, designed to startle the reader into recognizing the inadequacy of conventional moral categories. As he also says in the opening summary, "Without Contraries is no progression," and "Reason and Energy" are both "necessary to Human existence." It turns out that Blake subordinates his reversal of conventional values under a more inclusive point of view, according to which the real Good, as distinguished from the merely ironic Good, is not abandonment of all restraints but a "marriage," or union of the contraries, of desire and restraint, energy and reason, the promptings of Hell and the denials of Heaven—or as Blake calls these contraries in plate 16, "the Prolific" and "the Devouring." These two classes, he adds, "should be enemies," and "whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence." Implicit in Blake's satire is the view that the good and abundant life consists in the sustained tension, without victory or suppression, of co-present oppositions.

When Blake composed this unique work in the early 1790s, his city of London was teeming with religious mystics, astrologers, and sometimes bawdy freethinkers who were determined to challenge the established Church's monopoly on spirituality and who were reviving the link, created in the seventeenth century, between enthusiasm in religion and political revolution. The work is also a response to the writings of the visionary Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, whom Blake had at first admired but then had come to recognize as a conventional Angel in the disguise of a radical Devil. In plate 3 the writings of Swedenborg are described as the winding clothes Blake discards as he is resurrected from the tomb of his past self, as a poet-prophet who heralds the apocalyptic promise of his age. Blake shared the expectations of a number of radical English writers, including the young poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, that the French Revolution was the violent stage that, as the biblical prophets foresaw, immediately preceded the millennium. The double role of *The Marriage* as both satire and revolutionary prophecy is made explicit in "A Song of Liberty," which Blake etched in 1792 and added as a coda.

# The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

## PLATE 2

### The Argument

Rintrah<sup>1</sup> roars & shakes his fires in the burdend air;  
Hungry clouds swag on the deep.

Once meek, and in a perilous path,  
The just man kept his course along  
The vale of death.  
5      Roses are planted where thorns grow,  
And on the barren heath  
Sing the honey bees.

Then the perilous path was planted,  
And a river, and a spring,  
10      On every cliff and tomb;  
And on the bleached bones  
Red clay<sup>2</sup> brought forth;

Till the villain left the paths of ease,  
To walk in perilous paths, and drive  
15      The just man into barren climes.

Now the sneaking serpent walks  
In mild humility,  
And the just man rages in the wilds  
Where lions roam.  
20

Rintrah roars & shakes his fires in the burdend air;  
Hungry clouds swag on the deep.

### PLATE 3

As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent, the Eternal Hell revives. And lo! Swedenborg<sup>3</sup> is the Angel sitting at the tomb; his writings are the linen clothes folded up. Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise; see Isaiah xxxiv & XXXV Chap.<sup>4</sup>

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.

Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

### PLATE 4

#### **The Voice of the Devil**

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors:

1. That Man has two real existing principles; Viz: a Body & a Soul.
2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following Contraries to these are True:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.



### 3. Energy is Eternal Delight.

#### PLATE 5

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.

And being restrained, it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of desire.

The history of this is written in *Paradise Lost*,<sup>5</sup> & the Governor or Reason is call'd Messiah.

And the original Archangel, or possessor of the command of the heavenly host, is call'd the Devil or Satan, and his children are call'd Sin & Death.<sup>6</sup>

But in the Book of Job, Milton's Messiah is call'd Satan.<sup>7</sup>

For this history has been adopted by both parties.

It indeed appear'd to Reason as if Desire was cast out; but the Devil's account is, that the Messi[PLATE 6]ah fell, & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss.

This is shewn in the Gospel, where he prays to the Father to send the comforter or Desire that Reason may have Ideas to build on;<sup>8</sup> the Jehovah of the Bible being no other than he who dwells in flaming fire. Know that after Christ's death, he became Jehovah.

But in Milton, the Father is Destiny, the Son, a Ratio<sup>9</sup> of the five senses, & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum!

Note. The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

#### **A Memorable Fancy<sup>1</sup>**

As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their Proverbs; thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the Proverbs of Hell

shew the nature of Infernal wisdom better than any description of buildings or garments.

When I came home, on the abyss of the five senses, where a flat sided steep frowns over the present world, I saw a mighty Devil<sup>2</sup> folded in black clouds, hovering on the sides of the rock; with cor[PLATE 7]roding fires he wrote the following sentence now perceived by the minds of men, & read by them on earth:

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy  
way,  
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your  
senses five?

### **Proverbs of Hell<sup>3</sup>**

In seed time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.  
Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the  
dead.

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.  
Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by  
Incapacity.

5 He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.  
The cut worm forgives the plow.  
Dip him in the river who loves water.  
A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.  
He whose face gives no light, shall never become a  
star.

10 Eternity is in love with the productions of time.  
The busy bee has no time for sorrow.  
The hours of folly are measur'd by the clock; but of  
wisdom, no clock can measure.  
All wholsom food is caught without a net or a trap.  
Bring out number, weight, & measure in a year of  
dearth.

15 No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own  
wings.  
A dead body revenges not injuries.  
The most sublime act is to set another before you.  
If the fool would persist in his folly he would become  
wise.  
Folly is the cloke of knavery.  
Shame is Pride's cloke.  
20

## PLATE 8

Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with  
bricks of Religion.  
The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.  
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.  
The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.  
The nakedness of woman is the work of God.  
5 Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps.  
The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the  
raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive  
sword, are portions of eternity too great for the  
eye of man.  
The fox condemns the trap, not himself.  
Joys impregnate. Sorrows bring forth.  
Let man wear the fell of the lion, woman the fleece  
10 of the sheep.  
The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.  
The selfish smiling fool & the sullen frowning fool  
shall be both thought wise, that they may be a  
rod.  
What is now proved was once only imagin'd.  
The rat, the mouse, the fox, the rabbit watch the  
roots; the lion, the tyger, the horse, the elephant,  
watch the fruits,

15 The cistern contains; the fountain overflows.  
One thought fills immensity.  
Always be ready to speak your mind, and a base  
man will avoid you.  
Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of  
truth.  
The eagle never lost so much time as when he  
submitted to learn of the crow.

PLATE 9

The fox provides for himself, but God provides for  
the lion.  
Think in the morning, Act in the noon, Eat in the  
evening, Sleep in the night.  
He who has sufferd you to impose on him knows  
you.  
As the plow follows words, so God rewards prayers.  
5 The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of  
instruction.  
Expect poison from the standing water.  
You never know what is enough unless you know  
what is more than enough.  
Listen to the fool's reproach! it is a kingly title!  
The eyes of fire, the nostrils of air, the mouth of  
water, the beard of earth.  
10 The weak in courage is strong in cunning.  
The apple tree never asks the beech how he shall  
grow, nor the lion the horse, how he shall take his  
prey.  
The thankful reciever bears a plentiful harvest.  
If others had not been foolish, we should be so.  
The soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd.

15 When thou seest an Eagle, thou seest a portion of  
Genius; lift up thy head!  
As the catterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay  
her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the  
fairest joys.  
To create a little flower is the labour of ages.  
Damn braces; Bless relaxes.  
The best wine is the oldest, the best water the  
newest.  
20 Prayers plow not! Praises reap not!  
Joys laugh not! Sorrows weep not!

#### PLATE 10

The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals  
Beauty, the hands & feet Proportion.  
As the air to a bird or the sea to a fish, so is  
contempt to the contemptible.  
The crow wish'd every thing was black, the owl that  
every thing was white.  
Exuberance is Beauty.  
5 If the lion was advised by the fox, he would be  
cunning.  
Improvement makes strait roads, but the crooked  
roads without Improvement are roads of Genius.  
Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse  
unacted desires.  
Where man is not, nature is barren.  
Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and  
not be believ'd.  
10 Enough! or Too much.

## PLATE 11

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country, placing it under its mental deity.

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects; thus began Priesthood,

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things.

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.

## PLATE 12

### **A Memorable Fancy**

The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.

Isaiah answer'd: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote."

Then I asked: "Does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?"

He replied: "All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing."

Then Ezekiel said: "The philosophy of the East taught the first principles of human perception. Some nations held one principle for the origin & some another; we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative, which was the cause of our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods [PLATE 13] would at last be proved to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius; it was this that our great poet, King David, desired so fervently & invokes so pathetically, saying by this he conquers enemies & governs kingdoms; and we so loved our God, that we cursed in his name all the deities of surrounding nations, and asserted that they had rebelled; from these opinions the vulgar came to think that all nations would at last be subject to the Jews."

"This," said he, "like all firm perswasions, is come to pass, for all nations believe the Jews' code and worship the Jews' god, and what greater subjection can be?"

I heard this with some wonder, & must confess my own conviction. After dinner I ask'd Isaiah to favour the world with his lost works; he said none of equal value was lost. Ezekiel said the same of his.

I also asked Isaiah what made him go naked and barefoot three years? He answered, "the same that made our friend Diogenes,<sup>4</sup> the Grecian."

I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right & left side?<sup>5</sup> He answered, "the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite; this the North American tribes practise, & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification?"

#### PLATE 14

The ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true, as I have heard from Hell.

For the cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his guard at the tree of life;<sup>6</sup> and when he does, the whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite and holy, whereas it now appears finite & corrupt.

This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment.

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.<sup>7</sup>

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

## PLATE 15

### **A Memorable Fancy**

I was in a Printing house<sup>8</sup> in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation.

In the first chamber was a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a cave's mouth; within, a number of Dragons were hollowing the cave.

In the second chamber was a Viper folding round the rock & the cave, and others adorning it with gold, silver, and precious stones.

In the third chamber was an Eagle with wings and feathers of air; he caused the inside of the cave to be infinite; around were numbers of Eagle-like men, who built palaces in the immense cliffs.

In the fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire, raging around & melting the metals into living fluids.

In the fifth chamber were Unnam'd forms, which cast the metals into the expanse.



There they were receiv'd by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries.<sup>9</sup>

## PLATE 16

The Giants<sup>1</sup> who formed this world into its sensual existence, and now seem to live in it in chains, are in truth the causes of its life & the sources of all activity; but the chains are the cunning of weak and tame minds which have power to resist energy; according to the proverb, the weak in courage is strong in cunning.

Thus one portion of being is the Prolific, the other, the Devouring; to the Devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so; he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole.

But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights.

Some will say, "Is not God alone the Prolific?" I answer, "God only Acts & Is, in existing beings or Men."

These two classes of men are always upon earth, & they should be enemies; whoever tries [PLATE 17] to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence.

Religion is an endeavour to reconcile the two.

Note. Jesus Christ did not wish to unite but to separate them, as in the Parable of sheep and goats! & he says, "I came not to send Peace but a Sword."<sup>2</sup>

Messiah or Satan or Tempter was formerly thought to be one of the Antediluvians<sup>3</sup> who are our Energies.

## **A Memorable Fancy**

An Angel came to me and said: "O pitiable foolish young man! O horrible! O dreadful state! consider the hot burning dungeon thou art preparing for thyself to all eternity, to which thou art going in such career."

I said: "Perhaps you will be willing to shew me my eternal lot, & we will contemplate together upon it and see whether your lot or mine is most desirable."

So he took me thro' a stable & thro' a church & down into the church vault at the end of which was a mill; thro' the mill we went, and came to a cave; down the winding cavern we groped our tedious way till a void boundless as a nether sky appeared beneath us, & we held by the roots of trees and hung over this immensity, but I said: "If you please, we will commit ourselves to this void, and see whether Providence is here also, if you will not I will." But he answered: "Do not presume, O young man, but as we here remain, behold thy lot which will soon appear when the darkness passes away."<sup>4</sup>

So I remaind with him sitting in the twisted [PLATE 18] root of an oak; he was suspended in a fungus which hung with the head downward into the deep.

By degrees we beheld the infinite Abyss, fiery as the smoke of a burning city; beneath us at an immense distance was the sun, black but shining; round it were fiery tracks on which revolv'd vast spiders, crawling after their prey, which flew, or rather swum in the infinite deep, in the most terrific shapes of animals sprung from corruption; & the air was full of them, & seemed composed of them; these are Devils, and are called Powers of the air. I now asked my companion which was my eternal lot? He said, "Between the black & white spiders."

But now, from between the black & white spiders a cloud and fire burst and rolled thro the deep, blackning all beneath, so that the nether deep grew black as a sea & rolled with a terrible noise. Beneath us was nothing now to be seen but a black tempest, till looking east between the clouds & the waves, we saw a cataract of blood mixed with fire, and not many stones' throw from us appeared and sunk again the scaly fold of a monstrous serpent. At last to the east, distant about three degrees, appeared a fiery crest above the waves. Slowly it reared like a ridge of golden rocks till we discovered two globes of crimson fire, from which the sea fled away in clouds of

smoke. And now we saw it was the head of Leviathan;<sup>5</sup> his forehead was divided into streaks of green & purple like those on a tyger's forehead; soon we saw his mouth & red gills hang just above the raging foam, tinging the black deep with beams of blood, advancing toward [PLATE 19] us with all the fury of a spiritual existence.

My friend the Angel climb'd up from his station into the mill. I remain'd alone, & then this appearance was no more, but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon light, hearing a harper who sung to the harp, & his theme was: "The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind."

But I arose, and sought for the mill, & there I found my Angel, who surprised asked me how I escaped?

I answerd: "All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics: for when you ran away, I found myself on a bank by moonlight hearing a harper. But now we have seen my eternal lot, shall I shew you yours? He laughd at my proposal; but I by force suddenly caught him in my arms, & flew westerly thro' the night, til we were elevated above the earth's shadow; then I flung myself with him directly into the body of the sun. Here I clothed myself in white, & taking in my hand Swedenborg's volumes, sunk from the glorious clime, and passed all the planets till we came to Saturn. Here I staid to rest & then leap'd into the void between Saturn & the fixed stars.<sup>6</sup>

"Here," said I, "is your lot, in this space, if space it may be calld." Soon we saw the stable and the church, & I took him to the altar and open'd the Bible, and lo! it was a deep pit, into which I descended, driving the Angel before me. Soon we saw seven houses of brick;<sup>7</sup> one we enterd; in it were a [PLATE 20] number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species, chaind by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains. However, I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong, and with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devourd, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk. This, after grinning & kissing it with seeming fondness, they devourd too;

and here & there I saw one savourily picking the flesh off of his own tail. As the stench terribly annoyd us both, we went into the mill, & I in my hand brought the skeleton of a body, which in the mill was Aristotle's Analytics.<sup>8</sup>

So the Angel said: "Thy phantasy has imposed upon me, & thou oughtest to be ashamed."

I answerd: "We impose on one another, & it is but lost time to converse with you whose works are only Analytics."

### ***Opposition is true Friendship.***

#### PLATE 21

I have always found that Angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning.

Thus Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new; tho' it is only the Contents or Index of already publish'd books.

A man carried a monkey about for a shew, & because he was a little wiser than the monkey, grew vain, and conceiv'd himself as much wiser than seven men. It is so with Swedenborg; he shews the folly of churches & exposes hypocrites, till he imagines that all are religious, & himself the single [PLATE 22] one on earth that ever broke a net.

Now hear a plain fact: Swedenborg has not written one new truth. Now hear another: he has written all the old falshoods.

And now hear the reason: He conversed with Angels who are all religious, & conversed not with Devils, who all hate religion, for he was incapable thro' his conceited notions.

Thus Swedenborg's writings are a recapitulation of all superficial opinions, and an analysis of the more sublime, but no further.

Have now another plain fact: Any man of mechanical talents may from the writings of Paracelsus or Jacob Behmen<sup>9</sup> produce ten thousand volumes of equal value with Swedenborg's, and from those of Dante or Shakespear, an infinite number.

But when he has done this, let him not say that he knows better than his master, for he only holds a candle in sunshine.

### **A Memorable Fancy**

Once I saw a Devil in a flame of fire, who arose before an Angel that sat on a cloud, and the Devil uttered these words:

"The worship of God is, Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the [PLATE 23] greatest men best. Those who envy or calumniate great men hate God, for there is no other God."

The Angel hearing this became almost blue; but mastering himself, he grew yellow, & at last white, pink, & smiling, and then replied:

"Thou Idolater, is not God One? & is not he visible in Jesus Christ? and has not Jesus Christ given his sanction to the law of ten commandments, and are not all other men fools, sinners, & nothings?"

The Devil answer'd; "Bray a fool in a mortar with wheat, yet shall not his folly be beaten out of him.<sup>1</sup> If Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love him in the greatest degree. Now hear how he has given his sanction to the law of ten commandments: did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbath's God?<sup>2</sup> murder those who were murderd because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery?<sup>3</sup> steal the labor of others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defence before Pilate?<sup>4</sup> covet when he pray'd for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against such as refused to lodge them?<sup>5</sup> I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. Jesus was all virtue, and acted from im[PLATE 24]pulse, not from rules."

When he had so spoken, I beheld the Angel, who stretched out his arms embracing the flame of fire, & he was consumed and arose as Elijah.<sup>6</sup>

Note. This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend; we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well.

I have also The Bible of Hell,<sup>7</sup> which the world shall have whether they will or no.

One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression.

1790–93

1790–93

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Rintrah plays the role of the angry Old Testament prophet Elijah as well as of John the Baptist, the voice “crying in the wilderness” (Matthew 3), preparing the way for Christ the Messiah. It has been plausibly suggested that stanzas 2–5 summarize the course of biblical history to the present time. “Once” (line 3) refers to Old Testament history after the Fall; “Then” (line 9) is the time of the birth of Christ. “Till” (line 14) identifies the era when Christianity was perverted into an institutional religion. “Now” (line 17) is the time of the wrathful portent of the French Revolution. In this final era the hypocritical serpent represents the priest of the “angels” in  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In Hebrew the literal meaning of *Adam*, or created man. The probable reference is to the birth of the Redeemer, the new Adam.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3:  
Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Swedish scientist and religious philosopher, had predicted, on the basis of his visions, that the Last Judgment and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven would occur in 1757. This was precisely the year of Blake’s birth. Now, in 1790, Blake is thirty-three, the age at which Christ had been resurrected from the tomb;

correspondingly, Blake rises from the tomb of his past life in his new role as imaginative artist who will redeem his age. But, Blake ironically comments, the works he will engrave in his resurrection will constitute the Eternal Hell, the contrary brought into simultaneous being by Swedenborg's limited New Heaven.

[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4:

Isaiah 34 prophesies "the day of the Lord's vengeance," a time of violent destruction and bloodshed; Isaiah 35 prophesies the redemption to follow, in which "the desert shall . . . blossom as the rose," "in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert," and "no lion shall be there," but "an highway shall be there . . . and it shall be called The way of holiness" (see "The Argument," lines 3–11, 20). Blake combines with these chapters Isaiah 63, in which "Edom" is the place from which comes the man whose garments are red with the blood he has spilled; for as he says, "the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is

[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: What follows, to the end of this section, is Blake's "diabolical" reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Satan's giving birth to Sin and then incestuously begetting Death upon her is described in *Paradise Lost* 2.745ff.; the war in heaven, referred to three lines below, in which the Messiah defeated Satan and drove him out of heaven, is described in 6.824ff. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In the Book of Job, Satan plays the role of Job's moral accuser and physical tormentor. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Possibly John 14:16–17, where Christ says he "will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter . . . Even the Spirit of truth." [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The Latin *ratio* means both "reason" and "sum." Blake applies the term to the 18th-century view, following the empiricist philosophy of John Locke, that the content of the



mind, on which the faculty of reason operates, is limited to the sum of the experience acquired by the five senses.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Blake parodies Swedenborg's accounts, in his *Memorable Relations*, of his conversations with the inhabitants during his spiritual trips to heaven.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The "mighty Devil" is Blake, as he sees himself reflected in the shiny plate on which he is etching this very passage with "corroding fires," that is, the acid used in the etching process. See also the third from last sentence in plate 14.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A "diabolic" version of the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, which also incorporates sly allusions to 18th-century books of piety such as Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Greek Cynic (4th century C.E.), whose extreme repudiation of civilized customs gave rise to anecdotes that he had renounced clothing. In Isaiah 20:2–3 the prophet, at the Lord's command, walked "naked and barefoot" for three years.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Lord gave these instructions to the prophet Ezekiel (4:4–6).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In Genesis 3:24, when the Lord drove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he had placed Cherubim and a flaming sword at the eastern end "to keep the way of the tree of life."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: See n. 2, p. 152, above.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A covert pun runs through this section: workers, ink-blackened, who did the dirty work in the printing houses of the period were humorously known as "printer's devils."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In this "Memorable Fancy" Blake allegorizes his procedure in designing, etching, printing, and binding his works of imaginative genius.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In this section human creative energies, called "the Prolific," in their relation to their indispensable contrary, "the



Devourer.”[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Matthew 10:34. The parable of the sheep and the goats is in Matthew 25:32–33.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Those who lived before Noah’s Flood.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4:  
The “stable” is where Jesus was born, which, allegorically, leads to the “church” founded in his name and to the “vault” where this institution effectually buried him. The “mill” in Blake is a symbol of mechanical and analytic philosophy; through this the pilgrims pass into the twisting cave of rationalistic theology and descend to an underworld that is an empty abyss. The point of this Blakean equivalent of a carnival funhouse is that only after you have thoroughly confused yourself by this tortuous approach, and only if you then (as in the next two paragraphs) stare at this topsy-turvy emptiness long enough, will the void gradually assume the semblance of  
[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The biblical sea monster.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In the Ptolemaic world picture, Saturn was in the outermost planetary sphere; beyond it was the sphere of the fixed stars.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The “seven churches which are in Asia,” to which John addresses the Book of Revelation 1:4. Blake now forces on the angel his own diabolic view of angelic biblical exegesis, theological speculation and disputation, and Hell.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Aristotle’s treatises on logic.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Jakob Boehme (1575–1624), a German shoemaker who developed a theosophical system that has had persisting influence on both theological and metaphysical speculation. Paracelsus (1493–1541), a Swiss physician and a pioneer in empirical medicine, was also a prominent theorist of the occult.  
[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Proverbs 27:22: "Though thou shouldst bray a fool in a mortar among wheat with a pestle, yet will not his foolishness depart from him." "Bray": pound into small pieces.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Mark 2:27: "The sabbath was made for man."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Compare John 8:2–11.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Compare Matthew 27:13–14.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Matthew 10:14: "Whosoever shall not receive you . . . when ye depart . . . shake off the dust of your feet."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In 2 Kings 2:11 the prophet Elijah "went up by a whirlwind into heaven," borne by "a chariot of fire."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the poems and designs that Blake is working on.[Return to reference 7](#)

## A Song of Liberty<sup>1</sup>

1. The Eternal Female groand! it was heard over all the Earth.
2. Albion's<sup>2</sup> coast is sick, silent; the American meadows faint!
3. Shadows of Prophecy shiver along by the lakes and the rivers and mutter across the ocean. France, rend down thy dungeon!<sup>3</sup>
4. Golden Spain, burst the barriers of old Rome!
5. Cast thy keys, O Rome,<sup>4</sup> into the deep down falling, even to eternity down falling,
6. And weep.<sup>5</sup>
7. In her trembling hands she took the new born terror, howling.
8. On those infinite mountains of light now barr'd out by the Atlantic sea,<sup>6</sup> the new born fire stood before the starry king!<sup>7</sup>
9. Flag'd with grey brow'd snows and thunderous visages, the jealous wings wav'd over the deep.
10. The speary hand burned aloft, unbuckled was the shield, forth went the hand of jealousy among the flaming hair, and [PLATE 26] hurl'd the new born wonder thro' the starry night.
11. The fire, the fire, is falling!
12. Look up! look up! O citizen of London, enlarge thy countenance! O Jew, leave counting gold! return to thy oil and wine. O African! black African! (Go, wingèd thought, widen his forehead.)
13. The fiery limbs, the flaming hair, shot like the sinking sun into the western sea.
14. Wak'd from his eternal sleep, the hoary element<sup>8</sup> roaring fled away:
15. Down rushd, beating his wings in vain, the jealous king; his grey brow'd councillors, thunderous warriors, curl'd veterans,

among helms, and shields, and chariots, horses, elephants; banners,  
castles, slings and rocks,

16. Falling, rushing, ruining! buried in the ruins, on Urthona's  
dens;

17. All night beneath the ruins; then, their sullen flames faded,  
emerge round the gloomy king,

18. With thunder and fire, leading his starry hosts thro' the waste  
wilderness [PLATE 27] he promulgates his ten commands, glancing his  
beamy eyelids over the deep in dark dismay,

19. Where the son of fire in his eastern cloud, while the morning  
plumes her golden breast,

20. Spurning the clouds written with curses, stamps the stony  
law<sup>9</sup> to dust, loosing the eternal horses from the dens of night,  
crying:

"Empire is no more! and now the lion & wolf shall cease."<sup>1</sup>

### Chorus

Let the Priests of the Raven of dawn, no longer in deadly black,  
with hoarse note curse the sons of joy. Nor his accepted brethren,  
whom, tyrant, he calls free, lay the bound or build the roof. Nor pale  
religious lechery call that virginity, that wishes but acts not!

For every thing that lives is Holy.

1792

1792

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Blake etched this poem in 1792 and sometimes bound it as an appendix to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It recounts the birth, manifested in the contemporary events in France, of the flaming Spirit of Revolution (whom Blake later called Orc), and describes his conflict with the tyrannical sky god (whom

Blake later called Urizen). The poem ends with the portent of the Spirit of Revolution shattering the ten commandments, or prohibitions against political, religious, and moral liberty, and bringing in a free and joyous new world.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: England's.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The political prison, the Bastille, was destroyed by the French revolutionaries in 1789.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The keys of Rome, a symbol of papal power.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Echoing, among others, John 11:35 ("Jesus wept") and Revelation 18:11 (which states that at the fall of Babylon, "the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn for her").[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The legendary continent of Atlantis, sunk beneath the sea, which Blake uses to represent the condition before the Fall.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Blake often uses the stars, in their fixed courses, as a symbol of the law-governed Newtonian universe.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The sea, which to Blake represents a devouring chaos.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, the Ten Commandments (verse 18), which the "finger of God" had written on "tables [tablets] of stone" (Exodus 31:18).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Compare Isaiah's prophecy, 65:17–25, of "new heavens and a new earth," when "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock."[Return to reference 1](#)

**America: A Prophecy** Dated 1793, the year in which Britain and other European monarchies went to war against revolutionary France, Blake's *America: A Prophecy* looks back to an earlier revolution, and an earlier British war, folding the historical events and leading figures of the American War of Independence (1775–83) into the evolving world-historical myth Blake would continue to elaborate in subsequent "prophetic" books. Radiating through this work are the order-shattering energies of "fiery" Orc, the newborn spirit of revolution and "fierce" desire previewed in the previous year's "Song of Liberty" (see [p. 160](#), above). Bursting free of the chains that fetter him at the text's start, Orc furiously protests all kinds of unfreedom, psychological as well as physical. Orc tears (or melts) down the structures he confronts, but he is also a force of life and regeneration, seeking "to renew the fiery joy" that has been hidden by restrictive moral codes or the throttling of imagination and its expression. Through Orc, then, when the Americans stand up against tyranny, their defiance of authority takes shape as a broader attack on the "stony law" of sexual as well as political repression, and a broader assertion of the principle, also expressed in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that "every thing that lives is Holy." In opposition to Orc and to the American rebels stand the "Guardian Prince" and "Angels" of "Albion" (another name for England), representatives of the British establishment and the government of King George III, and behind these in turn is Blake's mythic figure Urizen, the aged, jealous guardian of "law-built heaven." These respond with both wrath and alarm to the flaming vision of the "terror" Orc and his liberatory proclamations.

*America* engages both the figurative repertoire of American colonial writers and political cartoonists expressing their resistance to British rule and the language of biblical prophecy in the Old and the New Testaments. Prophecy was a popular mode in Blake's moment, which abounded with millenarian predictions of a coming apocalypse and rebirth. This text's prophetic stance aims to shake readers out of accustomed modes of seeing in the present: on

*America's* final plate, the gates of perception that the monarchical powers desperately try to hold closed are instead opened by Orc's consuming flames. The drama of its war story takes place in large part through a clash of contrasting perspectives the reader must navigate, including visually on the page, in the relation of Blake's words and design. Blake's transatlantic engagement with the American Revolution during the moment of revolutionary "terror" in France encourages his audience both to consider the continuities between these revolutions and to distinguish each from the other.

# America: A Prophecy

Lambeth<sup>1</sup>

Printed by William Blake in the year 1793.

## *Preludium*

PLATE 1

The shadowy daughter of Urthona stood before red  
Orc,<sup>2</sup>  
When fourteen suns had faintly journey'd o'er his  
dark abode:  
His food she brought in iron baskets, his drink in  
cups of iron;<sup>3</sup>  
Crown'd with a helmet & dark hair the nameless  
female stood;  
5 A quiver with its burning stores, a bow like that of  
night,  
When pestilence is shot from heaven; no other arms  
she need:  
Invulnerable tho' naked, save where clouds roll  
round her loins,  
Their awful folds in the dark air; silent she stood as  
night;  
For never from her iron tongue could voice or sound  
arise;  
10 But dumb till that dread day when Orc assay'd his  
fierce embrace.

"Dark virgin," said the hairy youth, "thy father stern  
abhorr'd;



Rivets my tenfold chains while still on high my spirit  
soars;<sup>4</sup>  
Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky,  
sometimes a lion,  
Stalking upon the mountains, & sometimes a whale I  
lash  
15 The raging fathomless abyss, anon a serpent<sup>5</sup> folding  
Around the pillars of Urthona, and round thy dark  
limbs,  
On the Canadian wilds I fold, feeble my spirit folds.  
For chaind beneath I rend these caverns; when thou  
bringest food  
I howl my joy: and my red eyes seek to behold thy  
face  
20 In vain! these clouds roll to & fro, & hide thee from  
my sight."

## PLATE 2

Silent as despairing love, and strong as jealousy,  
The hairy shoulders rend the links, free are the  
wrists of fire;  
Round the terrific loins he siez'd the panting  
struggling womb;  
It joy'd: she put aside her clouds & smiled her first-  
born smile;  
5 As when a black cloud shews its light'nings to the  
silent deep.  
  
Soon as she saw the terrible boy then burst the  
virgin cry.  
  
"I know thee, I have found thee, & I will not let thee  
go;<sup>6</sup>

Thou art the image of God who dwells in darkness of  
Africa:  
And thou art fall'n to give me life in regions of dark  
death.<sup>7</sup>  
10 On my American plains I feel the struggling  
afflictions  
Endur'd by roots that writhe their arms into the  
nether deep:  
I see a serpent in Canada, who courts me to his  
love;  
In Mexico an Eagle, and a Lion in Peru;  
I see a Whale in the South-sea, drinking my soul  
away.  
15 O what limb rending pains I feel, thy fire & my frost  
Mingle in howling pains, in furrows by thy lightnings  
rent;  
This is eternal death; and this the torment long  
foretold."<sup>8</sup>

PLATE 3

***A prophecy***

The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly  
tent<sup>9</sup>  
Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow to America's  
shore:  
Piercing the souls of warlike men, who rise in silent  
night,  
Washington, Franklin, Paine & Warren, Gates,  
Hancock & Green<sup>1</sup>  
5 Meet on the coast glowing with blood from Albion's  
fiery Prince.

Washington spoke; "Friends of America look over the  
Atlantic sea;  
A bended bow is lifted in heaven, & a heavy iron  
chain  
Descends link by link from Albion's cliffs across the  
sea to bind  
Brothers & sons of America, till our faces pale and  
yellow;  
10 Heads deprest, voices weak, eyes downcast, hands  
work-bruis'd,  
Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of  
the whip  
Descend to generations that in future times forget.  
\_\_\_\_\_ "2

The strong voice ceas'd; for a terrible blast swept  
over the heaving sea;  
The eastern cloud rent; on his cliffs stood Albion's  
wrathful Prince,  
15 A dragon form clashing his scales; at midnight he  
arose,  
And flam'd red<sup>3</sup> meteors round the land of Albion  
beneath.  
His voice, his locks, his awful shoulders, and his  
glowing eyes

#### PLATE 4

Appear to the Americans upon the cloudy night.  
Solemn heave the Atlantic waves between the  
gloomy nations

Swelling, belching from its deeps red clouds & raging  
fires.  
Albion is sick. America faints! enrag'd the Zenith  
grew,<sup>4</sup>  
5 As human blood shooting its veins all round the  
orbed heaven,  
Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels  
of blood  
And in the red clouds rose a Wonder o'er the Atlantic  
sea;  
Intense! naked! a Human fire fierce glowing, as the  
wedge  
Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were  
fire  
10 With myriads of cloudy terrors, banners dark &  
towers  
Surrounded; heat but not light went thro' the murky  
atmosphere.  
  
The King of England looking westward trembles at  
the vision.

PLATE 5

Albion's Angel stood beside the Stone of night,<sup>5</sup> and  
saw  
The terror like a comet, or more like the planet red  
That once inclos'd the terrible wandering comets in  
its sphere.  
Then Mars thou wast our center, & the planets three  
flew round  
5 Thy crimson disk; so e'er the Sun was rent from thy  
red sphere;<sup>6</sup>

The Spectre glowd his horrid length staining the  
temple long  
With beams of blood; & thus a voice came forth, and  
shook the temple:

PLATE 6

“The morning comes, the night decays, the  
watchmen leave their stations;  
The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen  
wrapped up;  
The bones of death, the cov’ring clay, the sinews  
shrunk & dry’d,  
Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing!  
awakening!<sup>7</sup>  
5 Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds &  
bars are burst;  
Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the  
field;  
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the  
bright air;  
Let the inchained soul shut up in darkness and in  
sighing,  
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary  
years.  
10 Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon  
doors are open.  
And let his wife and children return from the  
opressor’s scourge:  
They look behind at every step & believe it is a  
dream.<sup>8</sup>  
Singing, ‘The Sun has left his blackness, & has found  
a fresher morning

And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear & cloudless  
night:  
15 For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf  
shall cease.' "[9](#)

#### PLATE 7

In thunders ends the voice. Then Albion's Angel  
wrathful burnt  
Beside the Stone of Night; and like the Eternal Lion's  
howl  
In famine & war, reply'd, "Art thou not Orc, who  
serpent-form'd  
Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her  
children;  
5 Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, hater of Dignities;  
Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of God's  
Law;  
Why dost thou come to Angels' eyes in this terrific  
form?" "[1](#)

#### PLATE 8

The terror answerd: "I am Orc, wreath'd round the  
accursed tree:  
The times are ended; shadows pass, the morning  
'gins to break;  
The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten  
commands,  
What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide  
wilderness:

5       That stony law I stamp to dust:<sup>2</sup> and scatter religion  
abroad  
To the four winds as a torn book, & none shall  
gather the leaves;  
But they shall rot on desert sands, & consume in  
bottomless deeps,  
To make the deserts blossom, & the deeps shrink to  
their fountains,<sup>3</sup>  
And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof,  
That pale religious lechery, seeking Virginity,  
10       May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty  
The undefil'd tho' ravish'd in her cradle night and  
morn:  
For every thing that lives is holy,<sup>4</sup> life delights in life;  
Because the soul of sweet delight can never be  
defil'd.  
15       Fires inwrap the earthly globe, yet man is not  
consumd;  
Amidst the lustful fires he walks; his feet become like  
brass,  
His knees and thighs like silver, & his breast and  
head like gold."<sup>5</sup>

#### PLATE 9

"Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets & alarm my  
Thirteen Angels!<sup>6</sup>  
Loud howls the eternal Wolf! The eternal Lion lashes  
his tail!  
America is darkned; and my punishing Demons  
terrified  
Crouch howling before their caverns deep like skins  
dry'd in the wind.

5        They cannot smite the wheat, nor quench the  
         fatness of the earth,  
      They cannot smite with sorrows, nor subdue the  
         plow and spade,  
      They cannot wall the city, nor moat round the castle  
         of princes.  
      They cannot bring the stubbed oak to overgrow the  
         hills.  
      For terrible men stand on the shores, & in their  
         robes I see  
10       Children take shelter from the lightnings: there  
         stands Washington  
      And Paine and Warren with their foreheads reard  
         toward the east  
      But clouds obscure my aged sight. A vision from  
         afar!  
      Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets & alarm my  
         thirteen Angels:  
      Ah vision from afar! Ah rebel form that rent the  
         ancient  
15       Heavens! Eternal Viper self-renew'd,<sup>7</sup> rolling in  
         clouds  
      I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's  
         shore.  
      Writhing in pangs of abhorred birth; red flames the  
         crest rebellious  
      And eyes of death; the harlot womb oft opened in  
         vain  
      Heaves in enormous circles, now the times are  
         return'd upon thee,  
20       Devourer of thy parent, now thy unutterable torment  
         renews.  
      Sound! sound! my loud war trumpets & alarm my  
         thirteen Angels,



Ah terrible birth! a young one bursting! where is the  
weeping mouth?  
And where the mother's milk? instead those ever-  
hissing jaws  
And parched lips drop with fresh gore: now roll thou  
in the clouds  
25 Thy mother lays her length outstretch'd upon the  
shore beneath.  
Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets & alarm my  
thirteen Angels!  
Loud howls the eternal Wolf: the eternal Lion lashes  
his tail!"

PLATE 10

Thus wept the Angel voice & as he wept the terrible  
blasts  
Of trumpets blew a loud alarm across the Atlantic  
deep.  
No trumpets answer: no reply of clarions or of fifes,  
Silent the Colonies remain and refuse the loud alarm.  
5 On those vast shady hills between America &  
Albion's shore:  
Now barr'd out by the Atlantic sea: call'd Atlantean  
hills;<sup>8</sup>  
Because from their bright summits you may pass to  
the Golden world  
An ancient palace, archetype of mighty Emperies,<sup>9</sup>  
Rears its immortal pinnacles, built in the forest of  
God  
10 By Ariston the king of beauty for his stolen bride.<sup>1</sup>

Here on their magic seats the thirteen Angels sat  
perturb'd  
For clouds from the Atlantic hover o'er the solemn  
roof,

PLATE 11

Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder  
roll'd  
Around their shores; indignant burning with the fires  
of Orc  
And Boston's Angel cried aloud as they flew thro' the  
dark night,

He cried: "Why trembles honesty and like a  
murderer,  
5 Why seeks he refuge from the frowns of his  
immortal station,  
Must the generous tremble & leave his joy, to the  
idle: to the pestilence!  
That mock him? who commanded this, what God?  
what Angel!  
To keep the gen'rous from experience till the  
ungenerous  
Are unrestrained performers of the energies of  
nature;  
10 Till pity is become a trade, and generosity a science  
That men get rich by, & the sandy desert is giv'n to  
the strong.  
What God is he, writes laws of peace, & clothes him  
in a tempest.  
What pitying Angel lustrous for tears, and fans himself  
with sighs,

What crawling villain preaches abstinence & wraps  
himself  
15 In fat of lambs? no more I follow, no more  
obedience pay."

PLATE 12

So cried he, rending off his robe & throwing down  
his scepter  
In sight of Albion's Guardian, and all the thirteen  
Angels  
Rent off their robes to the hungry wind, & threw  
their golden scepters  
Down on the land of America; indignant they  
descended  
5 Headlong from out their heav'nly heights,  
descending swift as fires  
Over the land; naked & fluming are their lineaments  
seen  
In the deep gloom. By Washington & Paine & Warren  
they stood  
And the flame folded roaring fierce within the pitchy  
night  
Before the Demon red, who burnt towards America,  
10 In black smoke, thunders and loud winds, rejoicing  
in its terror  
Breaking in smoky wreaths from the wild deep, &  
gath'ring thick  
In flames as of a furnace on the land from North to  
South.

PLATE 13

What time the thirteen Governors that England sent  
convene  
In Bernard's house,<sup>2</sup> the flames coverd the land;  
they rouze, they cry  
Shaking their mental chains<sup>3</sup> they rush in fury to the  
sea  
To quench their anguish; at the feet of Washington  
down fall'n  
They grovel on the sand and writhing lie, while all  
5 The British soldiers thro' the thirteen states sent up a  
howl  
Of anguish: threw their swords & muskets to the  
earth & ran  
From their encampments and dark castles seeking  
where to hide  
From the grim flames; and from the visions of Orc,  
in sight  
10 Of Albion's Angel; who, enrag'd, his secret clouds  
open'd  
From north to south, and burnt outstretchd on wings  
of wrath cov'ring  
The eastern sky, spreading his awful wings across  
the heavens;  
Beneath him rold his num'rous hosts, all Albion's  
Angels camp'd,  
Darkend the Atlantic mountains & their trumpets  
shook the valleys,  
15 Arm'd with diseases of the earth to cast upon the  
Abyss,  
Their numbers forty millions, must'ring in the eastern  
sky.<sup>4</sup>

In the flames stood & view'd the armies drawn out in  
the sky

Washington Franklin Paine & Warren Allen Gates &  
Lee.<sup>5</sup>

And heard the voice of Albion's Angel give the  
thunderous command.

His plagues obedient to his voice flew forth out of  
their clouds

5 Falling upon America, as a storm to cut them off,  
As a blight cuts the tender corn when it begins to  
appear.

Dark is the heaven above, & cold & hard the earth  
beneath;

And as a plague wind fill'd with insects cuts off man  
& beast;

And as a sea o'erwhelms a land in the day of an  
earthquake;

10 Fury! rage! madness! in a wind swept through  
America

And the red flames of Orc that folded roaring fierce  
around

The angry shores, and the fierce rushing of th'  
inhabitants together;

The citizens of New-York close their books & lock  
their chests;

The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and  
unlade;

15 The scribe of Pennsylvania casts his pen upon the  
earth;

The builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in  
fear.<sup>6</sup>

Then had America been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the  
Atlantic,

And Earth had lost another portion of the infinite,  
But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging  
fire.  
20 The red fires rag'd! the plagues recoil'd! then rold  
they back with fury

PLATE 15

On Albion's Angels: then the Pestilence began in  
streaks of red  
Across the limbs of Albion's Guardian, the spotted  
plague smote Bristol's  
And the Leprosy London's Spirit, sickening all their  
bands:<sup>7</sup>  
The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off  
their hammerd mail,  
5 And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood a  
naked multitude.  
Albion's Guardian writhed in torment on the eastern  
sky  
Pale quivring toward the brain his glimmering eyes,  
teeth chattering  
Howling & shuddering his legs quivering; convuls'd  
each muscle & sinew  
Sick'ning lay London's Guardian, and the ancient  
miter'd York<sup>8</sup>  
10 Their heads on snowy hills, their ensigns sick'ning in  
the sky.  
  
The plagues creep on the burning winds driven by  
flames of Orc,  
And by the fierce Americans rushing together in the  
night

Driven o'er the Guardians of Ireland and Scotland  
and Wales  
They spotted with plagues forsook the frontiers &  
their banners seard  
15 With fires of hell, deform their ancient heavens with  
shame & woe,  
Hid in his caves the Bard of Albion<sup>9</sup> felt the  
enormous plagues.  
And a cowl of flesh grew o'er his head & scales on  
his back & ribs;  
And rough with black scales all his Angels fright their  
ancient heavens.  
The doors of marriage are open, and the Priests in  
rustling scales  
20 Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of  
Orc,  
That play around the golden roofs in wreaths of  
fierce desire,  
Leaving the females naked and glowing with the  
lusts of youth,  
  
For the female spirits of the dead pining in bonds of  
religion  
Run from their fetters reddening, & in long drawn  
arches sitting:  
25 They feel the nerves of youth renew, and desires of  
ancient times,  
Over their pale limbs as a vine when the tender  
grape appears.

PLATE 16

Over the hills, the vales, the cities, rage the red  
flames fierce;

The Heavens melted from north to south; and Urizen  
who sat  
Above all heavens in thunders wrap'd, emerg'd his  
leprous head  
From out his holy shrine, his tears in deluge piteous  
Falling into the deep sublime! flag'd with grey-brow'd  
5 snows  
And thunderous visages, his jealous wings wav'd  
over the deep;  
Weeping in dismal howling woe he dark descended  
howling  
Around the smitten bands, clothed in tears &  
trembling shudd'ring cold.  
His stored snows he poured forth, and his icy  
magazines<sup>1</sup>  
He open'd on the deep, and on the Atlantic sea  
10 white shiv'ring.  
Leprous his limbs, all over white, and hoary was his  
visage.  
Weeping in dismal howlings before the stern  
Americans  
Hiding the Demon red with clouds & cold mists from  
the earth;  
Till Angels & weak men twelve years<sup>2</sup> should govern  
o'er the strong:  
And then their end should come, when France  
15 reciev'd the Demon's light.

Stiff shudderings shook the heav'nly thrones! France  
Spain & Italy  
In terror view'd the bands of Albion, and the ancient  
Guardians  
Fainting upon the elements, smitten with their own  
plagues



They slow advance to shut the five gates of their  
 law-built heaven  
 Filled with blasting fancies and with mildews of  
 despair  
 With fierce disease and lust, unable to stem the fires  
 of Orc;  
 But the five gates<sup>3</sup> were consum'd, & their bolts and  
 hinges melted  
 And the fierce flames burnt round the heavens, &  
 round the abodes of men.

1793

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A London neighborhood, on the south bank of the Thames, to which Blake and his wife, Catherine, moved in 1790. Blake's "illuminated" books of this period are collectively known as the "Lambeth prophecies." [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The "nameless" female figure of line 4 speaks as the voice of the North and South American continents on plate 4 (compare Oothoon, the "soft soul of America," in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*). For Urthona, whose "dens" are mentioned in "The Song of Liberty," see pp. 160–61. Like the biblical Esau (in Genesis 25:25), Orc is born "red" and "hairy" (line 11, below); red is also the color of the planet Mars, named for the Roman god of war and destruction. Orc has grown into adolescence in 14 years (line 2), roughly the stretch of time between the commencement of the American Revolution in 1775 and of the French Revolution in 1789. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In their historical fables of the origins of society, 18th-century political philosophers drew on classical myth to contrast an idyllic golden age of natural freedom to a subsequent "iron age" characterized by the development of weapons, social

institutions, and tools—an association suggested by the “iron” cups and baskets (and tongue, below) of Urthona’s “shadowy daughter.”[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Blake’s editors have noted the resemblance between Orc in chains and Prometheus, the rebel Titan chained by Zeus in Greek mythology.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: On the following plate, each of these animals is identified with a particular region of the Americas.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Recalling Song of Solomon 3:1: “By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but found him not.”[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The imagery here is that of falling rains bringing forth life from the fertile earth.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Blake’s design for this plate depicts a male youth, probably Orc, pushing his way out of the ground. At the bottom of the plate, below the figure of the youth emerging, Blake included lines describing the Bard, reciter of this song, destroying his harp in rage and shame: “The stern Bard ceas’d, ashame’d of his own song; enrag’d he swung / His harp aloft sounding, then dash’d its shining frame against / A ruin’d pillar in glittering fragments; silent he turn’d away, / And wander’d down the vales of Kent in sick & drear lamentings.” Blake seems subsequently to have rethought these lines: in most of the copies he produced, he covered over this portion of the plate so the passage does not print.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Though not reducible to a single historical person, Albion’s Guardian Prince is identified by many commentators with King George III, projected onto a mythic scale.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Prominent figures of the American Revolution: the generals George Washington, Horatio Gates, and Nathanael Greene; statesman and printer Benjamin Franklin; Thomas Paine, author of *Common Sense*; Joseph Warren, revolutionary hero who died at the Battle of Bunker Hill; and John Hancock, signer of the Declaration of Independence.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Here and throughout the text, the quotation marks indicating dialogue are not in Blake's original, but have been supplied for clarity by the editors of our source text, Mary Lynn Johnson and John Grant.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Associating the American colonies with a serpent facing off against a British dragon, Blake taps into figurative language often used by colonial commentators on the political situation running up to the American Revolution.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Compare "A Song of Liberty," line 2. "Zenith": the highest zone of the sky.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Throughout *America*, stoniness connotes both the inflexibility of law and the limitation of possibility, most directly in the reference to the "stony law" (Plate 8, line 5) of the Ten Commandments. In Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), the "Stone of night" appears as an element of druidic religion, a symbol of power connected by Blake with Urizen.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The red planet Mars is imagined as the center of an earlier arrangement of the solar system.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Line 2 alludes to Christ's burial and resurrection (compare *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 3). Lines 3–4 allude to Ezekiel 37, which describes how the prophet walks in the valley of dry bones and witnesses the bones revived by the breath of God, with a great "shaking," into "an exceeding great army."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Compare Adam and Eve's departure from Eden in *Paradise Lost* 12.641–49.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: This was also the closing motto of the "Song of Liberty" (see p. 161, above).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Orc takes the form of a serpent, "terrific" in the senses of awe-inspiring and terrifying; Enitharmon, the mother figure at the heart of Blake's *Europe*, gave birth to Orc along with other sons. Emphasizing how Orc appears "to Angels' eyes," Blake reminds us this is how Orc appears in one perspective, the perception of Angels.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: A reprise of elements of the "Song of Liberty." For "Urizen," see p. 132, n. 2 and p. 146, n. 2. The "stony law" derives from the "ten commands" written on tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: More biblical imagery, recalling the desert's blossoming in Isaiah 35:1 and the receding of floodwaters in Genesis 8:2.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This statement can be found at the conclusions of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and "A Song of Liberty."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Imagery derived from two stories related in the book of Daniel: in one (3:23–27), the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and his counselors cast three men into a "fiery furnace," and are astonished to see that the flames do not touch them; in the other, the king dreams of a "great image" whose "head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay" (2:31–33). As the critic Harold Bloom points out, Blake's version subtly shifts the gradation of metals by starting with feet of brass.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Representing the thirteen colonies.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: With the image of the "Viper self-renew'd," Blake (or the angel) again borrows directly from the iconography of the American colonials, which included devices based on the ouroboros (snake eating its own tail) as well as Benjamin Franklin's "join or die" image of the colonies as separate pieces of a snake reunited into one body.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Evoking the myth of an Edenic Atlantis buried beneath the sea, Blake imagines the Atlantic Ocean as covering a land passage between England and America as well as a passageway to a "Golden world."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Dominions.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, Ariston, a king of Sparta, so desired the beautiful wife of his friend that he tricked the friend into giving her to him.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Sir Francis Bernard (1712–1779), appointed governor of Massachusetts in 1759, resigned in 1771 after a tenure in which he earned the enmity of many colonists.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: “Mental chains” recalls the famous sentence at the start of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762), “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.” Blake’s poem “London” refers to the “mind-forg’d manacles” of London’s citizenry (see p. 137, above).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the design for this plate, the narration of the onset of war is framed by a grim ocean scene, with waves at the top of the page and the bottom of the sea below; the text thus appears as if it is underwater. The corpse of a woman is floating on the waves, her body being devoured by an eagle, while another corpse, a drowned man, lies on the sea floor, with sea creatures attacking it.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Ethan Allen and (most probably) Henry Lee, two more military heroes of the American Revolution, now accompany the roll call first set out in Plate 5.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Boston’s sailors “unlade” or unload ships, perhaps an allusion to the Boston Tea Party; the “scribe” of Pennsylvania is the writer and printer Benjamin Franklin; Virginia’s “builder” is politician and architect Thomas Jefferson, who designed his home, Monticello, and the Virginia state capitol (the actual building, of course, was carried out with enslaved labor).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The ill-treatment that Britain has inflicted on America like a “plague” now rebounds, infecting Britain herself with suffering. As a port city, Bristol was especially sensitive to interruption of commerce with America.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Mitres are the headdresses worn by bishops, such as the archbishops of York and Canterbury (the latter’s palace is in London).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Editors Grant and Johnson suggest a possible reference to William Whitehead, England’s poet laureate during the period of the American Revolution.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Clouds unleashing snowstorms and hail are compared to “icy magazines” (magazines are storehouses of military armaments).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Americans defeated the British at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, twelve years before Blake writes his prophecy in 1793.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Orc’s flames consume the “gates” of the five senses. Compare Blake’s injunction that the “doors of perception must be cleansed” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 14.[Return to reference 3](#)

## And did those feet<sup>1</sup>

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

5 And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here,  
Among those dark Satanic Mills?<sup>2</sup>

10 Bring me my Bow of burning gold,  
Bring me my Arrows of desire,  
Bring me my Spear; O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

15 I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green & pleasant Land.

ca. 1804–10

ca. 1810–18

## Endnotes

- Note 1: These quatrains occur in the preface to Blake's prophetic poem *Milton*. There is an ancient belief that Jesus came to England with Joseph of Arimathea, the merchant who is identified in the Gospels as making the arrangements for Christ's burial following the crucifixion. Blake adapts the legend to his own conception of a spiritual Israel, in which the significance of biblical events is as relevant to England as to Palestine. By a particularly Blakean irony, this poem of mental

war in the service of apocalyptic desire is widely used as a hymn, national anthem, or school song by just those establishment figures whom Blake would call “angels.”[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: There may be an allusion here to industrial England, but the mill is also Blake’s symbol for a mechanistic and utilitarian worldview, according to which, as he said elsewhere, “the same dull round, even of a universe” becomes “a mill with complicated wheels.”[Return to reference 2](#)



# ROBERT BURNS

## 1759–1796

When Robert Burns published *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* in 1786, he was immediately hailed by the Edinburgh establishment as an instance of the natural genius, a “Heaven-taught ploughman” whose poems owed nothing to literary study, but instead represented the spontaneous overflow of his native feelings. Burns took care to call attention to those qualities in his verse—the undisciplined energy and rustic simplicity—that suited the temper of an age worried that modern refinement and propriety had undermined the vigor of poetry. But even though he cast himself (in the half-modest, half-defiant words of his Preface to *Poems*) as someone “unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule,” Burns was in fact a widely read (although largely self-educated) man and a careful craftsman who turned to two earlier traditions for his poetic models. One of these was an oral tradition of folklore and popular balladry. The other was the highly developed literary tradition of poetry written in Scots or Lallans—the distinct English of Lowland Scotland.

His father—William Burnes, as he spelled his name—was a God-fearing and hardworking farmer of Ayrshire, a county in southwestern Scotland, who, unable to make a go of it in a period of hard times and high rents, died in 1784 broken in body and spirit. Robert, with his brother Gilbert, was forced to do the heavy work of a man while still a boy and began to show signs of the heart trouble

of which he was to die when only thirty-seven. Although his father had the Scottish esteem for education and saw to it that his sons attended school whenever they could, Burns's education in literature, theology, politics, and philosophy came mainly from his own reading. At the age of fifteen, he fell in love and was inspired by that event to write his first song. "Thus," he said, "with me began Love and Poesy." After he reached maturity, he practiced at both. He began a series of love affairs, fathering in 1785 the first of a number of illegitimate children. He also extended greatly the range and quantity of his attempts at poetry. So rapid was his development that by the time he published the Kilmarnock edition, at the age of twenty-seven, he had written all but a few of his greatest long poems.

The Kilmarnock volume (so named from the town in which it was published) is one of the most remarkable first volumes by any British poet, and it had a great and immediate success. Burns was acclaimed "Caledonia's Bard" and championed by intellectuals and gentlefolk when he visited the city of Edinburgh soon after his book came out. The peasant-poet demonstrated that he could more than hold his own as an urbane conversationalist and debater. But he was also wise enough to realize that once the novelty wore off, his eminence in this society would not endure. He had a fierce pride that was quick to resent any hint of contempt or condescension toward himself as a man of low degree. His sympathies were democratic, and even in 1793 and 1794, when partisans of parliamentary reform were being prosecuted for sedition in Edinburgh and Glasgow, he remained (like William Blake in London) an outspoken admirer of the republican revolutions in America and France. In religion too he was a radical. Against the strict Calvinism of the Presbyterian kirk (church) in which he had been raised, Burns was known to profess "the Religion of Sentiment and Reason." A letter of December 1789, in which he seizes the chance to play a free-thinking Son "of Satan," merrily proclaims his intention to take up a theme that will, he says, be "pregnant with all the stores of Learning, from Moses & Confucius to [Benjamin] Franklin & [Joseph]

Priestl[e]y—in short . . . I intend to write Baudy.” Burns’s satires on the kirk and taste for bawdy vulgarity could offend. Furthermore, his promiscuity gained him considerable notoriety, less because womanizing was out of the common order for the time than because he flaunted it. Many of the friendships that he made in high society fell apart, and Burns’s later visits to Edinburgh were less successful than the first.

In 1788 Burns was given a commission as excise officer, or tax inspector, and he settled down with Jean Armour, a former lover, now his wife, at Ellisland, near Dumfries, combining his official duties with farming. This was the fourth farm on which Burns had worked; and when it, like the others, failed, he moved his family to the lively country town of Dumfries. Here he was fairly happy, despite recurrent illness and a chronic shortage of money. He performed his official duties efficiently and was respected by his fellow townspeople and esteemed by his superiors; he was a devoted family man and father; and he accumulated a circle of intimates to whom he could repair for conversation and conviviality. In 1787 James Johnson, an engraver, had enlisted Burns’s aid in collecting Scottish ballads for an anthology called *The Scots Musical Museum*. Burns soon became the real editor for several volumes of this work, devoting all of his free time to collecting, editing, restoring, and imitating traditional songs, and to writing verses of his own to traditional dance tunes. Almost all of his creative work during the last twelve years of his life went into the writing of songs for the *Musical Museum* and for George Thomson’s *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*. This was for Burns a devoted labor of love and patriotism, done anonymously, for which he refused to accept any pay, although badly in need of money; and he continued the work when he was literally on his deathbed.

Because of its use of Scots, the language spoken by most eighteenth-century Scottish people (lower and upper class alike), and because, in addition, of its lyricism and engagement with folk culture, Burns’s verse is often said to anticipate William Wordsworth’s idea of a poetry founded on “a selection of language

really used by men." This account is based primarily on his songs. By far the major portion of the poems that he published under his own name are concerned with men and manners and are written in the literary forms that had been favored by earlier eighteenth-century poets. They include brilliant satire in a variety of modes, a number of fine verse epistles to friends and fellow poets, and one masterpiece of mock-heroic (or at any rate seriocomic) narrative, "Tam o' Shanter." It can be argued that, next to Pope, Burns is the greatest eighteenth-century master of these literary types. (Byron would later claim those forms for his own generation.) Yet Burns's writings in satire, epistle, and mock-heroic are remote from Pope's in their heartiness and verve, no less than in their dialect and intricate stanza forms. The reason for the difference is that Burns turned for his models not to Horace and the English neoclassic tradition but to the native tradition that had been established in the golden age of Scots poetry by Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas, and other Scottish Chaucerians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He knew this literature through his eighteenth-century Scottish predecessors, especially Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, who had collected some of the old poems and written new ones based on the old models. Burns improved greatly on these predecessors, but he derived from them much that is characteristic in his literary forms, subjects, diction, and stanzas.

Burns's songs, which number more than three hundred, have, however, in themselves been enough to sustain his poetic reputation. They made him, for a start, a central figure for his contemporaries' discussions of how music, valued by them for awakening sympathies that reason could not rouse, might serve as the foundation of a national identity. (William Wordsworth would explore this new notion of "national music"—of ethnically marked melody—in his 1805 poem "The Solitary Reaper.") But beyond being the bard of Scots nationalism, Burns is a songwriter for all English-speaking people. Evidence of that standing is supplied each New Year's Eve, when, moved once again to acknowledge their common

bondage to time, people join hands and sing "Auld Lang Syne," to an old tune that Burns refitted with his new words.

# To a Mouse

*On turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough, November  
1785<sup>1</sup>*

Wee, sleekit,<sup>o</sup> cowrin,<sup>o</sup> tim'rous beastie,  
O, what a pannic's in thy breastie!  
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,  
Wi' bickering brattle!<sup>2</sup>  
5 I wad be laith<sup>o</sup> to rin<sup>o</sup> an' chase thee,  
Wi' murd'ring *pattle!*<sup>o</sup>

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion  
Has broken Nature's social union,  
An' justifies that ill opinion,  
Which makes thee startle  
10 At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,  
*An' fellow-mortal!*

I doubt na, whyles,<sup>o</sup> but thou mayst thief;  
What then? Poor beastie, thou maun<sup>o</sup> live!  
15 A *daimen-icker* in a *thrave*<sup>3</sup>  
'S a sma' request;  
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,<sup>o</sup>  
An' never miss't!

Thy wee bit *housie*, too, in ruin!  
Its silly wa's<sup>o</sup> the win's are strewin!  
20 An' naething, now, to big<sup>o</sup> a new ane  
O' foggage<sup>o</sup> green!  
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,  
Baith snell<sup>o</sup> an' keen!

25       Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,  
An' weary Winter comin fast,  
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,  
              Thou thought to dwell,  
Till crash! the cruel *coulter*<sup>o</sup> past  
              Out thro' thy cell.

30               That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,<sup>o</sup>  
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!  
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,  
              But<sup>o</sup> house or hald,<sup>4</sup>  
35       To thole<sup>o</sup> the Winter's sleety dribble,  
              An' cranreuch<sup>o</sup> cauld!

              But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane,<sup>o</sup>  
In proving *foresight* may be vain:  
The best-laid schemes o' *Mice* an' *Men*  
              Gang aft a-gley,<sup>5</sup>  
40       An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
              For promis'd joy!

              Still thou art blest, compar'd wi' *me*!  
The present only toucheth thee:  
But, Och! I backward cast my e'e<sup>o</sup>  
45       On prospects drear!  
An' forward, tho' I canna *see*,  
              I *guess* an' *fear*!

1785

## Endnotes

1786

- Note 1: Burns's brother claimed this poem was composed while the poet was actually holding the plow.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: With headlong scamper.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An occasional ear in twenty-four sheaves.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Hold, holding (that is, land).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Go often awry.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *sleek* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cowering* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *loath* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *run* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *plowstaff* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sometimes* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *must* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *remainder* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *frail walls* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *build* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *coarse grass* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bitter* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cutter blade* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stubble* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *without* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *endure* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hoarfrost* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *not alone* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *eye* [Return to reference °](#)



# To a Louse

## *On seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet at Church*

Ha! whare ye gaun, ye crowlin<sup>o</sup> ferlie!<sub>o</sub>  
Your impudence protects you sairle:<sub>o</sub>  
I canna say but ye strunt<sup>o</sup> rarely,  
Owre gauze and lace;  
5 Tho' faith, I fear, ye dine but sparely  
On sic a place.

Ye ugly, creepin, blastit wonner,<sub>o</sub>  
Detested, shunn'd, by saunt<sub>o</sub> an' sinner,  
How daur ye set your fit<sup>o</sup> upon her,  
Sae fine a Lady!  
10 Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner,  
On some poor body.

Swith,<sub>o</sub> in some beggar's haffet<sub>o</sub> squattle;<sub>o</sub>  
There ye may creep, and sprawl, and sprattle<sub>o</sub>  
15 Wi' ither kindred, jumping cattle,  
In shoals and nations;  
Whare *horn* nor *bane*<sup>1</sup> ne'er dare unsettle  
Your thick plantations.

Now haud<sub>o</sub> you there, ye're out o' sight,  
Below the fatt'rels,<sub>o</sub> snug and tight;  
20 Na faith ye yet!<sup>2</sup> ye'll no be right  
'Till ye've got on it,  
The vera tapmost, tow'ring height  
O' *Miss's bonnet*.

My sooth! right bauld ye set your nose out,

25 As plump an' gray as onie grozet:°  
O for some rank, mercurial rozet,°  
Or fell,° red smeddum,°  
I'd gie you sic a hearty dose o't,  
30 Wad dress your droddum!°

I wad na been surpris'd to spy.  
You on an auld wife's flainen toy;°  
Or aiblins° some bit duddie° boy,  
On's wyliecoat;°  
35 But Miss's fine *Lunardi*!³ fie!  
How daur ye do't?

O, *Jenny*, dinna toss your head,  
An' set your beauties a' abroad!°  
Ye little ken° what cursed speed  
The blastie's° makin!  
40 Thae° *winks* and *finger-ends*, I dread,  
Are notice takin!

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
*To see oursels as others see us!*  
It wad frae monie a blunder free us  
45 An' foolish notion:  
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,  
And ev'n Devotion!⁴

1785

## Endnotes

1786

- Note 1: That is, fine-tooth comb made of bone ("bane").[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Confound you![Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A balloon-shaped bonnet, named after Vincenzo Lunardi, who made a number of balloon flights in the 1780s.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: That is, affected piety.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *crawling* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wonder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sorely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strut*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wonder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *saint*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *swift* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hair* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sprawl*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *struggle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hold*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ribbon ends*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gooseberry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rosin*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sharp* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *powder*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *buttocks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *flannel cap*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perhaps* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ragged*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *undershirt*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *abroad*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *know*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *creature's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *those*[Return to reference](#) °

# Green Grow the Rashes

## ***A FRAGMENT.***

CHORUS.

*Green grow the rashes, o O;  
Green grow the rashes, O;  
The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,  
Are spent among the lasses, O.*

### **I**

5      There's nought but care on ev'ry han',  
         In ev'ry hour that passes, O:  
What signifies the life o' man,  
         An' 'twere na for the lasses, O.  
                 *Green grow, etc.*

### **II**

10      The warly o race may riches chase,  
         An' riches still may fly them, O;  
An' tho' at last they catch them fast,  
         Their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O.  
                 *Green grow, etc.*

### **III**

15      But gie me a canny o hour at e'en, o  
         My arms about my Dearie, O;  
An' warly cares, an' warly men,  
         May a' gae tapsalteerie, o O!  
                 *Green grow, etc.*

## IV

For you sae douse,<sup>o</sup> ye sneer at this,  
Ye're nought but senseless asses, O:  
The wisest Man<sup>1</sup> the warl' e'er saw,  
He dearly lov'd the lasses, O.  
20 *Green grow, etc.*

## V

Auld Nature swears, the lovely Dears  
Her noblest work she classes, O:  
Her prentice<sup>o</sup> han' she try'd on man,  
An' then she made the lasses, O.  
*Green grow, etc.*

1784

## Endnotes

1787

- Note 1: Solomon, the Old Testament king who "loved many strange women" (1 Kings 11:1). [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *rushes* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *worldly* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *quiet* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *evening* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *topsy-turvy* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *prudent* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *apprentice* [Return to reference °](#)

# Holy Willie's Prayer<sup>1</sup>

O thou, wha<sup>o</sup> in the heavens dost dwell,  
Wha, as it pleases best thyself,  
Sends ane<sup>o</sup> to heaven and ten to hell,  
A' for thy glory,  
And no for any guid or ill  
5 They've done afore thee!

I bless and praise thy matchless might,  
Whan thousands thou hast left in night,  
That I am here afore thy sight,  
For gifts an' grace  
10 A burnin' an' a shinin' light,  
To a' this place.

What was I, or my generation,<sup>o</sup>  
That I should get such exaltation,  
I wha deserve sic just damnation,  
15 For broken laws,  
Five thousand years 'fore my creation,  
Thro' Adam's cause.

When frae my mither's womb I fell,  
Thou might hae plunged me in hell,  
20 To gnash my gums, to weep and wail,<sup>2</sup>  
In burnin' lake,  
Whar damned devils roar and yell,  
Chain'd to a stake.

Yet I am here a chosen sample,  
25 To show thy grace is great an' ample;  
I'm here a pillar in thy temple,

Strong as a rock,  
 A guide, a buckler<sup>o</sup> an' example  
 To a' thy flock.  
 30

But yet, O L—d! confess I must,  
 At times I'm fash'd<sup>o</sup> wi' fleshly lust;  
 An' sometimes too, wi' worldly trust<sup>o</sup>  
 Vile self gets in;  
 But thou remembers we are dust,  
 35 Defil'd in sin.

O L—d! yestreen,<sup>o</sup> thou kens, wi' Meg,  
 Thy pardon I sincerely beg,  
 O! may it ne'er be a livin' plague  
 To my dishonour,  
 40 An' I'll ne'er lift a lawless l—g<sup>o</sup>  
 Again upon her.

Besides, I farther maun<sup>o</sup> allow,  
 Wi Lizzie's lass, three times I trow;<sup>o</sup>  
 But, L—d, that Friday I was fow,<sup>o</sup>  
 45 When I came near her,  
 Or else, thou kens, thy *servant true*,  
 Wad ne'er hae steer'd<sup>o</sup> her.

Maybe thou lets this *fleshly thorn*  
 Beset thy servant e'en and morn,<sup>3</sup>  
 50 Lest he owre high and proud shou'd turn,  
 'Cause he's sae *gifted*;  
 If sae, thy han' maun e'en be born,  
 Until thou lift it.

L—d bless thy Chosen in this place,  
 55 For *here* thou hast a *chosen race*;  
 But G—d confound their stubborn face,  
 And blast their name,

60                   Wha bring thy elders to disgrace  
                           An' public shame.  
  
                   L—d mind G—n H—n's<sup>4</sup> deserts,  
                   He drinks, an' swears, an' plays at carts,<sup>o</sup>  
                   Yet has sae mony takin' arts,  
                                   Wi' grit an' sma',<sup>o</sup>  
 65                   Frae G—d's an priest the people's hearts  
                           He steals awa'.  
  
                   An' whan we chasten'd him therefore,  
                   Thou kens how he bred sic a splore,<sup>o</sup>  
                   As set the world in a roar  
                                   O' laughin' at us;  
 70                   Curse thou his basket and his store,  
                           Kail<sup>o</sup> an' potatoes.  
  
                   L—d hear my earnest cry an' pray'r,  
                   Against that presbyt'ry o' Ayr;  
                   Thy strong right hand, L—d make it bare,  
 75                                   Upo' their heads,  
                   L—d weigh it down, and dinna spare,  
                           For their misdeeds.  
  
                   O L—d my G—d, that glib-tongu'd A—n,<sup>o</sup>  
                   My very heart an' saul<sup>o</sup> are quakin',  
 80                   To think how we stood sweatin' shakin',  
                                   An' p—d wi' dread,  
                   While he wi' hingin'<sup>o</sup> lips and snakin'<sup>5</sup>  
                           Held up his head.  
  
                   L—d in the day of vengeance try him,  
 85                   L—d visit them wha did employ him,  
                   An' pass not in thy mercy by 'em,  
                                   Nor hear their pray'r;  
                   But for thy people's sake destroy 'em,



90 And dinna spare.

But, L—d remember me and mine  
Wi' mercies temp'ral and divine,  
That I for gearo and grace may shine,  
Extoll'd by name,  
95 An' a' the glory shall be thine,  
Amen, Amen!

1785

## Endnotes

This satire, which takes the form of a dramatic monologue, was inspired by William Fisher, a self-righteous church elder in the same Ayrshire parish that in 1785 had forced Burns and Betty Paton to do public penance for “fornication.” The poem is directed against a basic Calvinist tenet of the old Scottish kirk: Holy Willie assumes that as one of a small minority, God’s “elect,” he has been predestined for grace, no matter what deeds he does in this world.

Another manuscript version of "Holy Willie's Prayer," in what is known as the Glenriddell Manuscript, includes a prologue that outlines Burns's "Argument" as follows: "Holy Willie was a rather oldish bachelor Elder in the parish of Mauchline, & much & justly famed for that polemical chattering which ends in tipping Orthodoxy, & for that Spiritualized Bawdry which refines to Liqueurish Devotion.—In a Sessional process [a trial carried on

under the auspices of the Kirk government] with a gentleman in Mauchline, a Mr. Gavin Hamilton, Holy Willie, and his priest, father Auld, after full hearing of the Presbytery of Ayr, came off but second best; owing partly to the oratorical powers of Mr. Robert Aiken, Mr. Hamilton's Counsel; but chiefly to Mr. Hamilton's being one of the most irreproachable & truly respectable characters in the country.—On losing his Process, the Muse overheard him [Holy Willie] at his devotions as follows —." The Glenriddell manuscript also gives the poem an epigraph from Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. "And send the Godly in a pet to pray—."

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: An echo of Matthew 8:12; "the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An echo of 2 Corinthians 12:7: "there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Burns's friend Gavin Hamilton, whom Holy Willie had brought up on moral charges before the kirk session of the Presbytery of Ayr. As Burns explained in the manuscript Argument, Hamilton was defended by his counsel, Robert Aiken (referred to in line 79).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Burns's modern editor, Robert Irvine, suggests that in "snaking," Aiken may be sniffing contemptuously.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *who*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *one*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ancestry*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *shield*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *troubled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *duty*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *yesterday night*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leg*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *believe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drunk*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *molested*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cards*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *great and small*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *disturbance*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *broth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Aiken*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *soul*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hanging*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *riches*[Return to reference](#) °

# Tam o' Shanter: A Tale<sup>1</sup>

Of Brownie and of Bogill is full is this buke.

—GAWIN DOUGLAS

When chapmen billies<sup>o</sup> leave the street,  
And drouthy<sup>o</sup> neebors, neebors meet,  
As market-days are wearing late,  
An' folk begin to tak the gate;<sup>o</sup>  
While we sit bousing at the nappy,<sup>o</sup>  
5 And getting fou<sup>o</sup> and unco<sup>o</sup> happy,  
We think na on the lang Scots miles,<sup>2</sup>  
The mosses, waters, slaps,<sup>o</sup> and styles,  
That lie between us and our hame,  
Whare sits our sulky sullen dame,  
10 Gathering her brows like gathering storm,  
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.

This truth fand<sup>o</sup> honest *Tam o' Shanter*,  
As he frae Ayr ae night did canter,  
(Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses,  
15 For honest men and bonny lasses).

O *Tam!* hadst thou but been sae wise,  
As ta'en thy ain wife *Kate's* advice!  
She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum,<sup>o</sup>  
A blethering,<sup>o</sup> blustering, drunken blellum;<sup>o</sup>  
20 That frae November till October,  
Ae<sup>o</sup> market-day thou was nae sober;  
That ilka<sup>o</sup> melder,<sup>3</sup> wi' the miller,  
Thou sat as lang as thou had siller;<sup>o</sup>  
That every naig<sup>o</sup> was ca'd<sup>o</sup> a shoe on,

25 The smith and thee gat roaring fou on;  
That at the L—d's house, even on Sunday,  
Thou drank wi' Kirkton Jean till Monday.  
She prophesied that late or soon,  
Thou would be found deep drown'd in Doon;  
30 Or catch'd wi' warlocks in the mirk,o  
By *Aloway's* auld haunted kirk.

Ah, gentle dames! it garso me greet,o  
To think how mony counsels sweet,  
How mony lengthen'd sage advices,  
35 The husband frae the wife despises!

But to our tale: Ae market-night,  
*Tam* had got planted unco right;  
Fast by an ingle,o bleezingo finely,  
Wi' reaming swats,o that drank divinely;  
40 And at his elbow, Soutero *Johnny*,  
His ancient, trusty, drouthy crony;  
*Tam* lo'ed him like a vera brither;  
They had been fou for weeks thegither.  
The night drave on wi' sangs and clatter;  
45 And ay the ale was growing better:  
The landlady and *Tam* grew gracious,  
Wi' favours, secret, sweet, and precious:  
The Souter tauld his queerest stories;  
The landlord's laugh was ready chorus:  
50 The storm without might rairo and rustle,  
*Tam* did na mind the storm a whistle.

Care, mad to see a man sae happy,  
E'en drown'd himself amang the nappy:  
As bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure,  
55 The minutes wing'd their way wi' pleasure:  
Kings may be blest, but *Tam* was glorious,  
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!

But pleasures are like poppies spread,  
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;  
60 Or like the snow falls in the river,  
A moment white—then melts for ever;  
Or like the borealis race,  
That flit ere you can point their place;  
Or like the rainbow's lovely form  
65 Evanishing amid the storm.—  
Nae man can tether time or tide;  
The hour approaches Tam maun<sup>o</sup> ride;  
That hour, o' night's black arch the key-stane,  
That dreary hour he mounts his beast in;  
70 And sic a night he taks the road in,  
As ne'er poor sinner was abroad in.

The wind blew as 'twad blawn its last;  
The rattling showers rose on the blast;  
The speedy gleams the darkness swallow'd;  
75 Loud, deep, and lang, the thunder bellow'd:  
That night, a child might understand,  
The Deil<sup>o</sup> had business on his hand.

Weel mounted on his gray mare, *Meg*,<sup>4</sup>  
A better never lifted leg,<sup>5</sup>  
80 *Tam* skelpit<sup>o</sup> on thro' dub<sup>o</sup> and mire,  
Despising wind, and rain, and fire;  
Whiles holding fast his gude blue bonnet;  
Whiles crooning o'er some auld Scots sonnet;  
Whiles glowring<sup>o</sup> round wi' prudent cares,  
85 Lest bogles<sup>o</sup> catch him unawares:  
*Kirk-Alloway* was drawing nigh,  
Whare ghaists<sup>o</sup> and houlets<sup>o</sup> nightly cry.—

By this time he was cross the ford,  
Whare, in the snaw, the chapman smoor'd;<sup>6</sup>

90 And past the birks<sup>o</sup> and meikle stane,<sup>o</sup>  
Whare drunken *Charlie* brak's neck-bane;  
And thro' the whins, and by the cairn,<sup>7</sup>  
Whare hunters fand the murder'd bairn;<sup>o</sup>  
And near the thorn, aboon the well,  
95 Whare *Mungo's* mither hang'd hersel.—  
Before him *Doon* pours all his floods;  
The doubling storm roars thro' the woods;  
The lightnings flash from pole to pole;  
Near and more near the thunders roll:  
100 When, glimmering thro' the groaning trees,  
*Kirk-Alloway* seem'd in a bleeze;<sup>o</sup>  
Thro' ilka bore<sup>o</sup> the beams were glancing;  
And loud resounded mirth and dancing.—

105 Inspiring bold *John Barleycorn!*  
What dangers thou canst make us scorn!  
Wi' tippeny,<sup>8</sup> we fear nae evil;  
Wi' usquabae,<sup>o</sup> we'll face the devil!—  
The swats sae ream'd in *Tammie's* noddle,  
Fair play, he car'd na deils a boddle.<sup>9</sup>  
110 But *Maggie* stood right sair astonish'd,  
Till, by the heel and hand admonish'd,  
She ventured forward on the light;  
And, wow! *Tam* saw an unco<sup>o</sup> sight!

115 Warlocks and witches in a dance;  
Nae cotillion brent new<sup>o</sup> frae *France*,  
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys,<sup>1</sup> and reels,  
Put life and mettle in their heels.  
A winnock-bunker<sup>o</sup> in the east,  
There sat auld Nick, in shape o' beast;  
120 A towzie tyke,<sup>o</sup> black, grim, and large,  
To gie them music was his charge:  
He screw'd the pipes and gart<sup>o</sup> them skirl,<sup>o</sup>

Till roof and rafters a' did dirl.<sup>o</sup>  
Coffins stood round, like open presses,  
125 That shaw'd the dead in their last dresses:  
And by some devilish cantraip<sup>o</sup> slight  
Each in its cauld hand held a light.—  
By which heroic *Tam* was able  
To note upon the haly<sup>o</sup> table,  
130 A murderer's banes in gibbet airns;<sup>o</sup>  
Twa span-lang,<sup>2</sup> wee, unchristen'd bairns;  
A thief, new-cutted frae a rape,<sup>o</sup>  
Wi' his last gasp his gab<sup>o</sup> did gape;  
Five tomahawks, wi' blude red-rusted;  
135 Five scymitars, wi' murder crusted;  
A garter, which a babe had strangled;  
A knife, a father's throat had mangled,  
Whom his ain son o' life bereft,  
The grey hairs yet stack<sup>o</sup> to the heft;  
140 Wi' mair o' horrible and awefu',  
Which even to name wad be unlawfu'.

As *Tammie* glowr'd, amaz'd, and curious,  
The mirth and fun grew fast and furious:  
The piper loud and louder blew;  
145 The dancers quick and quicker flew;  
They reel'd, they set, they cross'd, they cleekit,<sup>o</sup>  
Till ilka carlin swat and reekit,<sup>3</sup>  
And coost her duddies to the wark,<sup>4</sup>  
And linket<sup>o</sup> at it in her sark!<sup>5</sup>  
150

Now, *Tam*, *O Tam!* had thae been queans,<sup>o</sup>  
A' plump and strapping in their teens,  
Their sarks, instead o' creeshie flannen,<sup>o</sup>  
Been snaw-white seventeen hunder linnen!<sup>6</sup>  
Thir<sup>o</sup> breeks o' mine, my only pair,  
155 That ance were plush, o' gude blue hair,



I wad hae gi'en them off my hurdies,<sup>o</sup>  
For ae blink o' the bonie burdies!<sup>o</sup>

160 But wither'd beldams,<sup>o</sup> auld and droll,  
Rigwoodie<sup>o</sup> hags wad spean<sup>o</sup> a foal,  
Lowping<sup>o</sup> and flinging on a crummock,<sup>o</sup>  
I wonder didna turn thy stomach.

165 But *Tam* kend what was what fu' brawlie,<sup>o</sup>  
There was ae winsome wench and wawlie,<sup>o</sup>  
That night enlisted in the core,<sup>o</sup>  
(Lang after kend on *Carrick* shore;  
For mony a beast to dead she shot,  
And perish'd mony a bony boat,  
And shook baith meikle corn and bear,<sup>o</sup>  
And kept the country-side in fear)  
170 Her cutty<sup>o</sup> sark, o' Paisley<sup>7</sup> harn,<sup>o</sup>  
That while a lassie she had worn,  
In longitude tho' sorely scanty,  
It was her best, and she was vauntie.<sup>o</sup>—  
Ah! little kend thy reverend grannie,  
175 That sark she coft<sup>o</sup> for her wee Nannie,  
Wi' twa pund Scots ('twas a' her riches),  
Wad ever grac'd a dance of witches!

180 But here my Muse her wing maun cour;<sup>o</sup>  
Sic flights are far beyond her pow'r;  
To sing how Nannie lap and flang,  
(A souple jade<sup>o</sup> she was, and strang),  
And how *Tam* stood, like ane bewitch'd,  
And thought his very een<sup>o</sup> enrich'd;  
Even Satan glowr'd, and fidg'd fu' fain,<sup>8</sup>  
185 And hotch'd<sup>o</sup> and blew wi' might and main:  
Till first ae caper, syne<sup>o</sup> anither,  
*Tam* tint<sup>o</sup> his reason a' thegither,  
And roars out, "Weel done, Cutty-sark!"

190 And in an instant all was dark:  
And scarcely had he Maggie rallied,  
When out the hellish legion sallied.

As bees bizz out wi' angry fyke,<sup>o</sup>  
When plundering herds<sup>o</sup> assail their byke;<sup>o</sup>  
As open<sup>o</sup> pussie's mortal foes,  
195 When, pop! she starts before their nose;  
As eager runs the market-crowd,  
When "Catch the thief!" resounds aloud;  
So Maggie runs, the witches follow,  
Wi' mony an eldritch<sup>o</sup> skreech and hollow.

200 Ah, *Tam!* Ah, *Tam!* thou'll get thy fairin'!<sup>9</sup>  
In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin!  
In vain thy *Kate* awaits thy comin!  
*Kate* soon will be a woefu' woman!  
Now, do thy speedy utmost, Meg,  
205 And win the key-stane<sup>1</sup> of the brig;<sup>o</sup>  
There at them thou thy tail may toss,  
A running stream they dare na cross.  
But ere the key-stane she could make,  
The fient<sup>o</sup> a tail she had to shake!  
210 For Nannie, far before the rest,  
Hard upon noble Maggie prest,  
And flew at Tam wi' furious ettle;<sup>o</sup>  
But little wist<sup>o</sup> she Maggie's mettle—  
Ae spring brought off her master hale,<sup>o</sup>  
215 But left behind her ain grey tail:  
The carlin claut<sup>o</sup> her by the rump,  
And left poor Maggie scarce a stump.<sup>2</sup>

Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read,  
220 Ilk man and mother's son, take heed:  
Whene'er to drink you are inclin'd,  
Or cutty-sarks run in your mind,

Think, ye may buy the joys o'er dear,  
Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare.

1790

1791, 1793

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This mock-heroic poem, written to order for a 1791 book on Scottish antiquities, is based on a witch story told about Alloway Kirk, the ruins of a 16th-century church near Burns's house in Ayr. Burns recognized that "Tam o' Shanter" was his masterpiece: true, he admitted in a letter, it exhibited "a spice of roguish waggery that might be spared," but it also showed "a force of genius, and a finishing polish, that I despair of ever excelling." The epigraph, added when "Tam o' Shanter" was republished in the 1793 edition of *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, is from the prologue to book 6 of Gavin Douglas's 16th-century Scots translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. In this book the epic hero Aeneas, soon to be the founder of Rome, descends into the world of the dead.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Scots miles measured just over two hundred feet longer than English miles.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The amount of grain processed at a single grinding.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Tam's horse, Meg (also called Maggie), occasions the poem's bawdiest wordplay.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Compare this "lifted leg" to Willie's use of the term about himself in line 41 of "Holy Willie's Prayer" (p. 177, above).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The peddler smothered.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Stones heaped up as a memorial. "Whins": furze, an evergreen shrub.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Two penny (usually of weak beer).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A very small copper coin. That is, the weak beer frothed up so much in Tam's brain ("noddle") that he didn't care a farthing about devils ("deils").[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: A slow Highland dance.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Two spans long (a span is the distance from outstretched thumb to little finger).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Until every old woman did sweat and smoke.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Cast off her clothes for the work.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Shirt (underclothes).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Very fine linen.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A major center of textile production.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Fidgeted with pleasure.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Literally, a present brought home from a fair. That is, Tam will get his just deserts.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: It is a well known fact that witches, or any evil spirits, have no power to follow a poor wight any farther than the middle of the next running stream. It may be proper likewise to mention to the benighted traveller, that when he falls in with *bogles*, whatever danger may be in his going forward, there is much more hazard in turning back [*Burns's note*].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, she had no tail left at all.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *peddler fellows*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thirsty*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *road*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *strong ale*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *drunk* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *very*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gaps in fences*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *found*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rascal*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *chattering* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *babbler*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *one*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *every*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *silver, money*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nag* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *driven*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *night*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *makes* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *weep*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fireplace* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blazing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foaming new ale*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Shoemaker*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *roar*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Devil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slapped* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *puddle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *staring*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bogeymen*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ghosts* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *owls*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *birches* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *big stone*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *child*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blaze*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hole*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whiskey*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strange*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *brand new*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *window seat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shaggy dog*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *made* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *screech*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rattle*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *charm, spell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *holy*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *irons*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *rope*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mouth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stuck*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *joined hands*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tripped lightly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *girls*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *greasy flannel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *These*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *buttocks*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bonny (pretty) girls*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hags*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ugly* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wean*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leaping* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *staff*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *finely*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *strapping*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *corps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *barley*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *short* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *yarn*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *proud*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bought*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lower*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hussie*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *eyes*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *jerked*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *then*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lost*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fuss*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *herdsmen* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *hive*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *begin to bark*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unearthly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bridge*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *devil*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *knew*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whole*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clutched*[Return to reference](#) °

## Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation

Fareweel to a' our Scottish fame,  
Fareweel our ancient glory!  
Fareweel ev'n to the Scottish name,  
Sae famed in martial story!  
5 Now Sark rins over Solway sands,  
An' Tweed rins to the ocean,  
To mark where England's province stands—  
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!

What force or guile could not subdue  
Thro' many warlike ages  
10 Is wrought now by a coward few  
For hireling traitors' wages.  
The English steel we could disdain,  
Secure in valour's station;  
But English gold has been our bane—  
15 Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!

O, would, or I had seen the day  
That Treason thus could sell us,  
My auld grey head had lien in clay  
Wi' Bruce and loyal Wallace!<sup>1</sup>  
20 But pith and power,<sup>o</sup> till my last hour  
I'll mak this declaration:—  
'We're bought and sold for English gold'—  
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!

1792

## Endnotes



- Note 1: For Bruce and Wallace, see “Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn,” below, notes 1 and 2. [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *with all my strength* [Return to reference °](#)

# Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn<sup>1</sup>

## [Scots, Wha Hae]

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace<sup>2</sup> bled,  
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,  
Welcome to your gory bed  
Or to victorie!

5      Now's the day, and now's the hour;  
See the front o' battle lour,  
See approach proud Edward's power—  
Chains and slaverie!

10     Wha will be a traitor knave?  
Wha can fill a coward's grave?  
Wha sae base as be a slave?—  
Let him turn, and flee!

15     Wha for Scotland's King and Law  
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,  
Freeman stand or freeman fa',  
Let him follow me!

20     By Oppression's woes and pains,  
By your sons in servile chains,  
We will drain our dearest veins  
But they shall be free!

Lay the proud usurpers low!  
Tyrants fall in every foe!  
Liberty's in every blow!  
Let us do, or die!

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Burns's words are set to the old tune to which, it was said, Robert Bruce's Scottish army had marched when it went to battle against the English invaders in 1314. This marching song is at once a historical reconstruction and an anthem for the revolutionary 1790s. Burns's turn to song writing in the last few years of his life might, the critic Marilyn Butler suggested, have had to do with the fact that songs like these, transmitted aurally, were more likely than compositions in other modes to slip past the scrutiny of a censorious government.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: William Wallace (1272–1305), the great Scottish warrior in the wars against the English.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Song: For a' that and a' that<sup>1</sup>

Is there for honest Poverty  
That hings,<sup>o</sup> his head, an' a' that?  
The coward slave, we pass him by—  
We dare be poor for a' that!  
For a' that, an' a' that,  
5 Our toils obscure, an' a' that,  
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,<sup>o</sup>  
The Man's the gowd<sup>o</sup> for a' that.

What though on hamely fare we dine,  
Wear hoddin grey,<sup>2</sup> an' a' that?  
10 Gie<sup>o</sup> fools their silks, and knaves their wine—  
A Man's a Man for a' that.  
For a' that, an' a' that,  
Their tinsel show, an' a' that,  
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,  
15 Is king o' men for a' that.

Ye see yon birkie<sup>o</sup> ca'd 'a lord,'  
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that?  
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,  
He's but a cuif<sup>o</sup> for a' that.  
20 For a' that, an' a' that,  
His ribband, star, an' a' that,  
The man o' independent mind,  
He looks an' laughs at a' that.

25 A prince can mak a belted knight,  
A marquis, duke, an' a' that!  
But an honest man's aboon<sup>o</sup> his might—  
Guid faith, he mauna fa' that!<sup>3</sup>

For a' that, an' a' that,  
 Their dignities, an' a' that,  
 30 The pith o' sense an' pride o' worth  
 Are higher rank than a' that.  
  
 Then let us pray that come it may  
 (As come it will for a' that)  
 That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth  
 35 Shall bear the gree° an' a' that!  
 For a' that, an' a' that,  
 It's comin yet for a' that,  
 That Man to Man the world o'er  
 Shall brithers be for a' that.

1795

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This song was set to a dance tune, known as "Lady Macintosh's Reel," that Burns had drawn on for previous songs.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A coarse cloth of undyed wool.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Must not claim that.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *hangs*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *inscription on a coin*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gold*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *give*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fellow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dolt*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *above*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *win the prize*[Return to reference °](#)

# A Red, Red Rose<sup>1</sup>

O, my Luve is like a red, red rose,  
That's newly sprung in June.  
O, my luve is like the melodie,  
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

5 As fair art thou, my bonie lass,  
So deep in luve am I,  
And I will luve thee still, my Dear,  
Till a' the seas gang <sup>o</sup> dry.

10 Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,  
And the rocks melt wi' the sun!  
O I will luve thee still, my dear,  
While the sands o' life shall run.

15 And fare thee weel, my only Luve,  
And fare thee weel, a while!  
And I will come again, my luve,  
Tho' it were ten thousand mile!

1794

## Endnotes

1796

- Note 1: Like many of Burns's lyrics, this one incorporates elements from several contemporary ballads. [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: [go Return to reference °](#)

# Auld Lang Syne<sup>1</sup>

CHORUS.

*For auld lang syne, my jo,<sup>o</sup>  
For auld lang syne,  
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet  
For auld lang syne!*

5      Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
         And never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
         And auld lang syne!

         And surely ye'll be<sup>o</sup> your pint-stowp,<sup>o</sup>  
         And surely I'll be mine,  
10      And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet  
         For auld lang syne!

         We twa<sup>o</sup> hae run about the braes,<sup>o</sup>  
         And pou'd<sup>o</sup> the gowans<sup>o</sup> fine,  
15      But we've wander'd monie a weary fit  
         Sin' auld lang syne.

         We twa hae paidl'd in the burn<sup>o</sup>  
         Frae morning sun till dine,<sup>o</sup>  
20      But seas between us braid<sup>o</sup> hae roar'd  
         Sin' auld lang syne.

         And there's a hand, my trusty fiere,<sup>o</sup>  
         And gie's a hand o' thine,  
         And we'll tak a right guid-willie waught<sup>o</sup>  
         For auld lang syne!

# Endnotes

- Note 1: Long ago.[Return to reference 1](#)

# Notes

- °: *sweetheart*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pay for* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pint cup*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *two* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *slopes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pulled* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *daisies*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stream*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dinner, noon*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *broad*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *friend*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hearty swig*[Return to reference °](#)



# An Age of Revolutions

"It is an age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for," declared the essayist Thomas Paine in his 1791 pamphlet *The Rights of Man*, voicing the sense of possibility shared by many advocates of reform in the early stages of the French Revolution. To the British-born Paine, whose writing had earlier energized the American colonists as they took on a monarchy, a direct line led from the American Declaration of Independence (1776) to the inaugural events of the French Revolution: the storming of the Bastille prison by an angry mob of Parisians on July 14, 1789, and the passage of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by the new National Assembly a month later. "What we now see in the world, from the revolutions of America and France," Paine sweepingly proposed, "are a renovation of the natural order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth and the existence of man." Paine and others envisioned such a transformative spirit radiating on to the rest of Europe, and alighting in England too. In a sermon preached in November 1789, on the anniversary of Britain's own "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, the Unitarian minister Richard Price advised "friends of freedom, and writers in its defence" that the "times are auspicious": "Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting *America* free, reflected to *France*, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates *Europe*! Tremble all ye oppressors of the world!" Subsequent events in France—the executions of the king and queen, the massacres during the Reign of Terror under Robespierre, the wars of imperial conquest under Napoleon—complicated such an optimistic outlook for many of the Revolution's initial supporters, as hope gave way to disappointment and disenchantment; in Britain, the government clamped down on reformist agitation, and Paine himself had to escape to France. Nonetheless, globally, the revolutionary activity of the era continued: from the 1791 uprising of enslaved persons in France's wealthiest Caribbean colony, St.-

Domingue; to failed insurgencies like the Irish Rebellion of 1798; to the nineteenth-century wars of liberation across South America under Simón Bolívar; to the working-class protest movements in England and across Europe that, to many in the nineteenth century, appeared to channel older dreams of a “renovated” social order.

The political upheavals of the period, however, involved in reality no single “system of principles,” as Paine had put it, but instead often competing and sometimes incompatible interests and ideas. Many who had supported the American Revolution as a legitimate response to tyranny saw in the French Revolution a dangerous overthrowing of traditional social order. Others on both sides of the Atlantic tested how truly universal were the concepts of rights, liberty, and equality enshrined in the revolutionists’ declarations. The French writer Olympe de Gouges, in her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (1791), insisted that rights of political participation must extend to *citoyennes* as well as *citoyens*—female as well as male citizens—ideas affirmed by the English writer Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The slave system in France’s colonies, meanwhile, stood as a glaring contradiction in the new republic’s language of universal rights. When France abolished colonial slavery in 1794, it was responding to a reality that had already been changed by the ongoing rebellion in St.-Domingue, one that would lead a decade later to the colony’s casting off French rule and becoming the new nation of Haiti.

The first section of this cluster explores the intense controversy in Britain in the early 1790s over the meaning of the events taking place just across the channel in France. Some writers in England responded to news of the Revolution with an enthusiasm that in its intensity resembled a religious awakening. Many tried to make sense of events in terms borrowed from the Bible, interpreting the Revolution as fulfilling the promise, guaranteed by an infallible text, that a short period of violence would ultimately usher in an era of universal peace in which the world would begin anew. Conservatives, on the other hand, were first wary, and then horrified. Most alarming to them, perhaps, was the emergent view that politics was the

legitimate business of the common people and should not be monopolized by an aristocratic elite.

The English debate about the French Revolution was initiated by Price's 1789 sermon, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, which he delivered just weeks after French citizens marched to the palace of Versailles and arrested King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, confining them to the Tuileries palace in Paris. When a year later Edmund Burke published a rebuttal to Price, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a "pamphlet war" heated up. *Reflections* drew more than fifty responses, including Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) as well as Paine's *Rights of Man*. While pamphlets such as Paine's—written in an accessible style—targeted a broad audience of the newly literate, so too did a full-throttled propaganda campaign launched by the British government to counter the threat of revolutionary ideas. This section concludes by sampling the pivotal contributions to that campaign that the brilliant artist James Gillray made in the dozens of political prints that he etched during the 1790s—works that seem to have begun as pictorial synopses of loyalist pamphlets, but whose shock tactics took them far beyond that assigned function.

In late October 1791, alongside daily updates on the political situation in Paris, British newspapers ran reports of ships arriving from the Caribbean with word of a massive slave revolt that had erupted two months prior on the sugar and coffee plantations of St.-Domingue, on the island of Hispaniola—an ocean away from England, but for many British observers uncomfortably close to Britain's slaveholding West Indian colonies (and near to the United States, as well). The uprising in St.-Domingue is the focus of the second section of our cluster, which includes documents from British observers and by the revolutionaries themselves. British involvement in the territory they called "Santo Domingo" deepened when Britain invaded in 1793, hoping to snatch the valuable colony for its own empire; the occupation persisted another five years, with disease as well as battlefield casualties exacting an enormous toll on British troops. By the time the British left, the talented general Toussaint

Louverture, once enslaved, had emerged as the French colony's de facto leader. In 1802, Toussaint was deported to France by Napoleon, who viewed him as a threat to his own authority (William Wordsworth's response to this turn of events is recorded in his sonnet "To Toussaint l'Ouverture"). Taking charge in Toussaint's stead, another general, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, also formerly enslaved, forced the French military from the island at the end of 1803, after brutal fighting. Declaring its independence on New Year's Day 1804, the new nation under Dessalines' leadership replaced the French "St.-Domingue" with the name Hayti (as it was then spelled), taken from the Taíno language of the island's original inhabitants. (France would finally recognize Haiti's independence only in 1825, after forcing Haiti to pay a vast sum in exchange for lost "property.")

In a letter to Byron in 1816, Percy Shelley called the French Revolution "the master theme of the epoch in which we live." The Haitian Revolution on occasion flared to the forefront of British consciousness, but at other times was easily pushed out of mind, though writers in Britain (and in Europe and America) continued to be haunted both by the specter of violent resistance to European rule, and by the power of the revolution's claims for freedom and recognition in the face of racial oppression. As the historian Laurent Dubois argues, understandings of citizenship, rights, and democratic inclusion forged in the struggles in and around the Caribbean continue to resonate globally.

These interconnected histories of revolution and empire around the Atlantic, and the debates in Britain about their meanings, profoundly shaped the literature of the Romantic period.

# **THE FRENCH REVOLUTION CONTROVERSY**

## RICHARD PRICE

Richard Price (1723–1791) was a Unitarian minister in London and a writer on moral philosophy, population, and the national debt, among other topics. The full title of his sermon, which prompted Burke's *Reflections* and in turn the scores of responses to Burke, is *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country, Delivered on Nov. 4, 1789, at the Meeting-House in the Old Jewry, to the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain*. The London Revolution Society had been founded a year earlier to mark the hundredth anniversary of the "bloodless" Glorious Revolution of 1688, which ended the short reign of King James II and produced the Declaration of Right, establishing a limited monarchy and guaranteeing the civil rights of privileged classes. The first two-thirds of the extracts given here commemorate that Revolution; in the final third, beginning "What an eventful period is this!" Price greets with religious fervor "two other Revolutions, both glorious," the American and the French. The *Discourse* went through six editions in its first year of publication.

## ***From A Discourse on the Love of Our Country***

We are met to thank God for that event in this country to which the name of THE REVOLUTION has been given; and which, for more than a century, it has been usual for the friends of freedom, and more especially Protestant Dissenters, under the title of the REVOLUTION SOCIETY, to celebrate with expressions of joy and exultation. \* \* \* By a bloodless victory, the fetters which despotism had been long preparing for us were broken; the rights of the people were asserted, a tyrant expelled, and a Sovereign of our own choice appointed in his room. Security was given to our property, and our consciences were emancipated. The bounds of free enquiry were enlarged; the volume in which are the words of eternal life, was laid more open to our examination; and that *aera* of light and liberty was introduced among us, by which we have been made an example to other kingdoms, and became the instructors of the world. Had it not been for this deliverance, the probability is, that, instead of being thus distinguished, we should now have been a base people, groaning under the infamy and misery of popery and slavery. Let us, therefore, offer thanksgivings to God, the author of all our blessings. \* \* \*

It is well known that King James was not far from gaining his purpose; and that probably he would have succeeded, had he been less in a hurry. But he was a fool as well as a bigot. He wanted courage as well as prudence; and, therefore, fled, and left us to settle quietly for ourselves that constitution of government which is now our boast. We have particular reason, as Protestant Dissenters, to rejoice on this occasion. It was at this time we were rescued from persecution, and obtained the liberty of worshipping God in the manner we think most acceptable to him. It was then our meeting houses were opened, our worship was taken under the protection of

the law, and the principles of toleration gained a triumph. We have, therefore, on this occasion, peculiar reasons for thanksgiving.—But let us remember that we ought not to satisfy ourselves with thanksgivings. Our gratitude, if genuine, will be accompanied with endeavours to give stability to the deliverance our country has obtained, and to extend and improve the happiness with which the Revolution has blest us.—Let us, in particular, take care not to forget the principles of the Revolution. This Society has, very properly, in its Reports, held out these principles, as an instruction to the public. I will only take notice of the three following:

First: The right to liberty of conscience in religious matters.

Secondly: The right to resist power when abused. And,

Thirdly: The right to chuse our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves.

\* \* \*

I would farther direct you to remember, that though the Revolution was a great work, it was by no means a perfect work; and that all was not then gained which was necessary to put the kingdom in the secure and complete possession of the blessings of liberty.—In particular, you should recollect, that the toleration then obtained was imperfect. It included only those who could declare their faith in the doctrinal articles of the church of England. It has, indeed, been since extended, but not sufficiently; for there still exist penal laws on account of religious opinions, which (were they carried into execution) would shut up many of our places of worship, and silence and imprison some of our ablest and best men.—The TEST LAWS are also still in force; and deprive of eligibility to civil and military offices, all who cannot conform to the established worship. It is with great pleasure I find that the body of Protestant Dissenters, though defeated in two late attempts to deliver their country from this disgrace to it, have determined to persevere. Should they at last succeed, they will have the satisfaction, not only of removing from themselves a proscription they do not deserve, but of contributing to



lessen the number of public iniquities. For I cannot call by a gentler name, laws which convert an ordinance appointed by our Saviour to commemorate his death, into an instrument of oppressive policy, and a qualification of rakes and atheists for civil posts.—I have said, *should* they succeed—but perhaps I ought not to suggest a doubt about their success. And, indeed, when I consider that in Scotland the established church is defended by no such test—that in Ireland it has been abolished—that in a great neighbouring country it has been declared to be an indefeasible right of all citizens to be equally eligible to public offices—that in the same kingdom a professed Dissenter from the established church holds the first office in the state—that in the Emperor's dominions *Jews* have been lately admitted to the enjoyment of equal privileges with other citizens—and that in this very country, a Dissenter, though excluded from the power of *executing* the laws, yet is allowed to be employed in *making* them.—When, I say, I consider such facts as these, I am disposed to think it impossible that the enemies of the repeal of the Test Laws should not soon become ashamed, and give up their opposition.

But the most important instance of the imperfect state in which the Revolution left our constitution, is the *inequality of our representation*. I think, indeed, this defect in our constitution so gross and so palpable, as to make it excellent chiefly in form and theory. You should remember that a representation in the legislature of a kingdom is the *basis* of constitutional liberty in it, and of all legitimate government; and that without it a government is nothing but an usurpation. When the representation is fair and equal, and at the same time vested with such powers as our House of Commons possesses, a kingdom may be said to govern itself, and consequently to possess true liberty. When the representation is partial, a kingdom possesses liberty only partially; and if extremely partial, it only gives a *semblance* of liberty; but if not only extremely partial, but corruptly chosen, and under corrupt influence after being chosen, it becomes a *nuisance*, and produces the worst of all forms of government—a government by corruption, a government carried on

and supported by spreading venality and profligacy through a kingdom. May heaven preserve this kingdom from a calamity so dreadful! It is the point of depravity to which abuses under such a government as ours naturally tend, and the last stage of national unhappiness. We are, at present, I hope, at a great distance from it. But it cannot be pretended that there are no advances towards it, or that there is no reason for apprehension and alarm.

\* \* \*

What an eventful period is this! I am thankful that I have lived to it; and I could almost say, *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation* [Luke 2:29–30]. I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error—I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever; and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it.—I have lived to see THIRTY MILLIONS of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice; their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects.—After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious.—And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.

Be encouraged, all ye friends of freedom, and writers in its defence! The times are auspicious. Your labours have not been in vain. Behold kingdoms, admonished by you, starting from sleep, breaking their fetters, and claiming justice from their oppressors! Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting *America* free, reflected to *France*, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates *Europe*!

Tremble all ye oppressors of the world! Take warning all ye supporters of slavish governments, and slavish hierarchies! Call no

more (absurdly and wickedly) REFORMATION, innovation. You cannot now hold the world in darkness. Struggle no longer against increasing light and liberality. Restore to mankind their rights; and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed together.

1789

## EDMUND BURKE

The great statesman and political theorist Edmund Burke (1729–1797) read Price's *Discourse* in January 1790 and immediately began drafting his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* as a reply in the form of a letter (as the lengthy subtitle describes it) "Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris" (a Frenchman who had written to Burke soliciting the British parliamentarian's opinion of events in his country). The work was published at the beginning of November and was an instant bestseller: thirteen thousand copies were purchased in the first five weeks, and by the following September it had gone through eleven editions. Clearly, part of its appeal to contemporary readers lay in the highly wrought accounts of the mob's violent treatment of the French king and queen (who at the time Burke was writing were imprisoned in Paris and would be executed three years later, in January and October 1793).

*Reflections* has become the classic, most eloquent statement of British conservatism favoring monarchy, aristocracy, property, hereditary succession, and the wisdom of the ages. Earlier in his career Burke had championed many liberal causes and sided with the Americans in their war for independence; opponents and allies alike were surprised at the strength of his conviction that the French Revolution was a disaster and the revolutionists "a swinish multitude."

## ***From Reflections on the Revolution in France***

\* \* \* All circumstances taken together, the French revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world. The most wonderful things are brought about in many instances by means the most absurd and ridiculous; in the most ridiculous modes; and apparently, by the most contemptible instruments. Every thing seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragi-comic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror.

\* \* \*

You will observe, that from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right,<sup>1</sup> it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance*<sup>2</sup> derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves an unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and an house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.

This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection; or rather the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it. A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.

Besides, the people of England well know, that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement. It leaves acquisition free; but it secures what it acquires. Whatever advantages are obtained by a state proceeding on these maxims, are locked fast as in a sort of family settlement; grasped as in a kind of mortmain<sup>3</sup> for ever. By a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives. The institutions of policy, the goods of fortune, the gifts of Providence, are handed down, to us and from us, in the same course and order. Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete. By adhering in this manner and on those principles to our forefathers, we are guided not by the superstition of antiquarians, but by the spirit of philosophic analogy. In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections; keeping inseparable, and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities, our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our altars.

Through the same plan of a conformity to nature in our artificial institutions, and by calling in the aid of her unerring and powerful instincts, to fortify the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason, we have derived several other, and those no small benefits, from

considering our liberties in the light of an inheritance. Always acting as if in the presence of canonized forefathers, the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity. This idea of a liberal descent inspires us with a sense of habitual native dignity, which prevents that upstart insolence almost inevitably adhering to and disgracing those who are the first acquirers of any distinction. By this means our liberty becomes a noble freedom. It carries an imposing and majestic aspect. It has a pedigree and illustrating ancestors. It has its bearings and its ensigns armorial. It has its gallery of portraits; its monumental inscriptions; its records, evidences, and titles. We procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle upon which nature teaches us to revere individual men; on account of their age; and on account of those from whom they are descended. All your sophisters<sup>4</sup> cannot produce any thing better adapted to preserve a rational and manly freedom than the course that we have pursued, who have chosen our nature rather than our speculations, our breasts rather than our inventions, for the great conservatories and magazines<sup>5</sup> of our rights and privileges.

\* \* \*

Far am I from denying in theory; full as far is my heart from withholding in practice (if I were of power to give or to withhold) the *real* rights of men. In denying their false claims of right, I do not mean to injure those which are real, and are such as their pretended rights would totally destroy. If civil society be made for the advantage of man, all the advantages for which it is made become his right. It is an institution of beneficence; and law itself is only beneficence acting by a rule. Men have a right to live by that rule; they have a right to justice; as between their fellows, whether their fellows are in politic function or in ordinary occupation. They have a right to the fruits of their industry; and to the means of making their industry fruitful. They have a right to the acquisitions of their parents; to the nourishment and improvement of their offspring; to

instruction in life, and to consolation in death. Whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself; and he has a right to a fair portion of all which society, with all its combinations of skill and force, can do in his favor. In this partnership all men have equal rights; but not to equal things. He that has but five shillings in the partnership, has as good a right to it, as he that has five hundred pound has to his larger proportion. But he has not a right to an equal dividend in the product of the joint stock; and as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society; for I have in my contemplation the civil social man, and no other. It is a thing to be settled by convention.

\* \* \*

History, who keeps a durable record of all our acts, and exercises her awful censure over the proceedings of all sorts of sovereigns, will not forget, either those events, or the era of this liberal refinement in the intercourse of mankind. History will record, that on the morning of the 6th of October 1789, the king and queen of France, after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter, lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite, and troubled melancholy repose. From this sleep the queen was first startled by the voice of the centinel at her door, who cried out to her, to save herself by flight—that this was the last proof of fidelity he could give—that they were upon him, and he was dead. Instantly he was cut down. A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and through ways unknown to the murderers had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.



This king, to say no more of him, and this queen, and their infant children (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people) were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewn with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses. Thence they were conducted into the capital of their kingdom. Two had been selected from the unprovoked, unresisted, promiscuous slaughter, which was made of the gentlemen of birth and family who composed the king's body guard. These two gentlemen, with all the parade of an execution of justice, were cruelly and publickly dragged to the block, and beheaded in the great court of the palace. Their heads were stuck upon spears, and led the procession; whilst the royal captives who followed in the train were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women. After they had been made to taste, drop by drop, more than the bitterness of death, in the slow torture of a journey of twelve miles, protracted to six hours, they were, under a guard, composed of those very soldiers who had thus conducted them through this famous triumph, lodged in one of the old palaces of Paris, now converted into a Bastille<sup>6</sup> for kings.

\* \* \*

I hear that the august person,<sup>7</sup> who was the principal object of our preacher's triumph,<sup>8</sup> though he supported himself, felt much on that shameful occasion. As a man, it became him to feel for his wife and his children, and the faithful guards of his person, that were massacred in cold blood about him; as a prince, it became him to feel for the strange and frightful transformation of his civilized subjects, and to be more grieved for them, than solicitous for himself. It derogates little from his fortitude, while it adds infinitely to the honor of his humanity. I am very sorry to say it, very sorry

indeed, that such personages are in a situation in which it is not unbecoming in us to praise the virtues of the great.

I hear, and I rejoice to hear, that the great lady, the other object of the triumph, has borne that day (one is interested that beings made for suffering should suffer well) and that she bears all the succeeding days, that she bears the imprisonment of her husband, and her own captivity, and the exile of her friends, and the insulting adulation of addresses, and the whole weight of her accumulated wrongs, with a serene patience, in a manner suited to her rank and race, and becoming the offspring of a sovereign distinguished for her piety and her courage;<sup>9</sup> that like her she has lofty sentiments; that she feels with the dignity of a Roman matron; that in the last extremity she will save herself from the last disgrace,<sup>1</sup> and that if she must fall, she will fall by no ignoble hand.

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness,<sup>2</sup> at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what an heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.—But the age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the

cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.

This mixed system of opinion and sentiment had its origin in the antient chivalry; and the principle, though varied in its appearance by the varying state of human affairs, subsisted and influenced through a long succession of generations, even to the time we live in. If it should ever be totally extinguished, the loss I fear will be great. It is this which has given its character to modern Europe. It is this which has distinguished it under all its forms of government, and distinguished it to its advantage, from the states of Asia, and possibly from those states which flourished in the most brilliant periods of the antique world. It was this, which, without confounding ranks, had produced a noble equality, and handed it down through all the gradations of social life. It was this opinion which mitigated kings into companions, and raised private men to be fellows with kings. Without force, or opposition, it subdued the fierceness of pride and power; it obliged sovereigns to submit to the soft collar of social esteem, compelled stern authority to submit to elegance, and gave a domination vanquisher of laws, to be subdued by manners.

But now all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex<sup>3</sup> in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly. Regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity. The murder of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, are only common homicide; and if the people are by any chance, or in any way gainers by it, a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny.

On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom, as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern, which each individual may find in them, from his own private speculations, or can spare to them from his own private interests. In the groves of *their* academy, at the end of every vizio, you see nothing but the gallows. Nothing is left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons; so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place. These public affections, combined with manners, are required sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids to law. The precept given by a wise man, as well as a great critic, for the construction of poems, is equally true as to states. *Non satis est pulchra esse poemata, dulcia sunt.*<sup>4</sup> There ought to be a system of manners in every nation which a well-formed mind would be disposed to relish. To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.

But power, of some kind or other, will survive the shock in which manners and opinions perish; and it will find other and worse means for its support. The usurpation which, in order to subvert antient institutions, has destroyed antient principles, will hold power by arts

similar to those by which it has acquired it. When the old feudal and chivalrous spirit of *Fealty*,<sup>5</sup> which, by freeing kings from fear, freed both kings and subjects from the precautions of tyranny, shall be extinct in the minds of men, plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventive murder and preventive confiscation, and that long roll of grim and bloody maxims, which form the political code of all power, not standing on its own honor, and the honor of those who are to obey it. Kings will be tyrants from policy when subjects are rebels from principle.

When antient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer. Europe undoubtedly, taken in a mass, was in a flourishing condition the day on which your Revolution was compleated. How much of that prosperous state was owing to the spirit of our old manners and opinions is not easy to say; but as such causes cannot be indifferent in their operation, we must presume, that, on the whole, their operation was beneficial.

We are but too apt to consider things in the state in which we find them, without sufficiently adverting to the causes by which they have been produced, and possibly may be upheld. Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion. The nobility and the clergy, the one by profession, the other by patronage, kept learning in existence, even in the midst of arms and confusions, and whilst governments were rather in their causes than formed. Learning paid back what it received to nobility and to priesthood; and paid it with usury,<sup>6</sup> by enlarging their ideas, and by furnishing their minds. Happy if they had all continued to know their indissoluble union, and their proper place! Happy if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor, and not aspired to be the master! Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning

will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude.

If, as I suspect, modern letters owe more than they are always willing to own to antient manners, so do other interests which we value full as much as they are worth. Even commerce, and trade, and manufacture, the gods of our oeconomical politicians, are themselves perhaps but creatures; are themselves but effects, which, as first causes, we choose to worship. They certainly grew under the same shade in which learning flourished. They too may decay with their natural protecting principles. With you, for the present at least, they all threaten to disappear together. Where trade and manufactures are wanting to a people, and the spirit of nobility and religion remains, sentiment supplies, and not always ill supplies their place; but if commerce and the arts should be lost in an experiment to try how well a state may stand without these old fundamental principles, what sort of a thing must be a nation of gross, stupid, ferocious, and at the same time, poor and sordid barbarians, destitute of religion, honor, or manly pride, possessing nothing at present, and hoping for nothing hereafter?

I wish you may not be going fast, and by the shortest cut, to that horrible and disgusting situation. Already there appears a poverty of conception, a coarseness and vulgarity in all the proceedings of the assembly and of all their instructors. Their liberty is not liberal. Their science is presumptuous ignorance. Their humanity is savage and brutal.

\* \* \*

1790

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The Magna Carta, the “great charter” of English personal and political liberty, dates from 1215. The Declaration

- of Right, another cornerstone of the English constitution, was a product of the Glorious Revolution of 1688.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An entail is a legal device that prescribes the line of succession along which a piece of family property must pass and that thereby prevents future generations of heirs from making their own decisions about that property.[Return to reference 2](#)
  - Note 3: A legal term (literally, “dead hand”) for the perpetual holding of lands by an ecclesiastical or other corporation.[Return to reference 3](#)
  - Note 4: Persons reasoning with clever and fallacious arguments (from the name given to a sect of paid teachers of rhetoric and philosophy in ancient Athens).[Return to reference 4](#)
  - Note 5: Storehouses.[Return to reference 5](#)
  - Note 6: The Bastille was France’s political prison.[Return to reference 6](#)
  - Note 7: King Louis XVI.[Return to reference 7](#)
  - Note 8: A reference to Price’s exclamation, in the final selection printed on p. 193, above, from *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, that he has lived to see the French “king led in triumph . . . an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects.”[Return to reference 8](#)
  - Note 9: Marie Antoinette was the daughter of Maria Theresa, empress of Austria.[Return to reference 9](#)
  - Note 1: Like the women of classical Rome when they endured defeat, Marie Antoinette, Burke suggests, will kill herself to preserve her chastity rather than suffer the disgrace of rape.[Return to reference 1](#)
  - Note 2: That is, wife of the dauphin, who was heir to the throne of France.[Return to reference 2](#)
  - Note 3: Homage paid to women.[Return to reference 3](#)
  - Note 4: “It is not enough for poems to have beauty; they must be sweet” (Latin; Horace’s *Ars Poetica* 99).[Return to reference 4](#)
  - Note 5: Fidelity of a vassal or feudal tenant to his lord.[Return to reference 5](#)
  - Note 6: Interest.[Return to reference 6](#)

## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

The first of the many published replies to Burke's *Reflections* was by Wollstonecraft, who appears elsewhere in this anthology as author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the landmark work in the history of feminism, and *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). Toward the end of 1790, when Burke's *Reflections* came out, she was working in London as a writer and translator for the radical publisher Joseph Johnson. Reading Burke, she was outraged at the weakness of his arguments and the exaggerated rhetoric with which he depicted the revolutionists as violators of royalty and womanhood. Always a rapid writer, she composed her reply, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in a matter of days, and Johnson's printer set it in type as fast as the sheets of manuscript were turned in. It was published anonymously in November, less than a month after Burke's *Reflections* first appeared, and a second edition (this time with her name on the title page) was called for almost immediately.



# ***From A Vindication of the Rights of Men***

## ***Advertisement***

Mr. Burke's Reflections on the French Revolution first engaged my attention as the transient topic of the day; and reading it more for amusement than information, my indignation was roused by the sophistical arguments, that every moment crossed me, in the questionable shape of natural feelings and common sense.

Many pages of the following letter were the effusions of the moment; but, swelling imperceptibly to a considerable size, the idea was suggested of publishing a short vindication of *the Rights of Men*.

Not having leisure or patience to follow this desultory writer through all the devious tracks in which his fancy has started fresh game, I have confined my strictures, in a great measure, to the grand principles at which he has levelled many ingenious arguments in a very specious garb.

## ***A Letter to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke***

Sir,

It is not necessary, with courtly insincerity, to apologize to you for thus intruding on your precious time, nor to profess that I think it an honor to discuss an important subject with a man whose literary abilities have raised him to notice in the state. I have not yet learned to twist my periods,<sup>1</sup> nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments, and imply what I should be afraid to utter: if, therefore, in the course of this epistle, I chance to express contempt, and even indignation, with some emphasis, I beseech you to believe that it is not a flight of fancy; for truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and, in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful. But I war not with an individual when I contend for the *rights of men* and the liberty of reason. You

see I do not condescend to cull my words to avoid the invidious phrase, nor shall I be prevented from giving a manly definition of it, by the flimsy ridicule which a lively fancy has interwoven with the present acceptation of the term. Reverencing the rights of humanity, I shall dare to assert them; not intimidated by the horse laugh that you have raised, or waiting till time has wiped away the compassionate tears which you have elaborately labored to excite.

From the many just sentiments interspersed through the letter before me, and from the whole tendency of it, I should believe you to be a good, though a vain man, if some circumstances in your conduct did not render the inflexibility of your integrity doubtful; and for this vanity a knowledge of human nature enables me to discover such extenuating circumstances, in the very texture of your mind, that I am ready to call it amiable, and separate the public from the private character.

\* \* \*

Quitting now the flowers of rhetoric, let us, Sir, reason together; and, believe me, I should not have meddled with these troubled waters, in order to point out your inconsistencies, if your wit had not burnished up some rusty, baneful opinions, and swelled the shallow current of ridicule till it resembled the flow of reason, and presumed to be the test of truth.

I shall not attempt to follow you through "horse-way and foot-path;"<sup>2</sup> but, attacking the foundation of your opinions, I shall leave the superstructure to find a center of gravity on which it may lean till some strong blast puffs it into the air; or your teeming fancy, which the ripening judgment of sixty years has not tamed, produces another Chinese erection,<sup>3</sup> to stare, at every turn, the plain country people in the face, who bluntly call such an airy edifice—a folly.

The birthright of man, to give you, Sir, a short definition of this disputed right, is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is

united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact.

Liberty, in this simple, unsophisticated sense, I acknowledge, is a fair idea that has never yet received a form in the various governments that have been established on our beauteous globe; the demon of property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men, and to fence round with awful pomp laws that war with justice. But that it results from the eternal foundation of right—from immutable truth—who will presume to deny, that pretends to rationality—if reason has led them to build their morality<sup>4</sup> and religion on an everlasting foundation—the attributes of God?

I glow with indignation when I attempt, methodically, to unravel your slavish paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed first principle to refute; I shall not, therefore, condescend to shew where you affirm in one page what you deny in another; and how frequently you draw conclusions without any previous premises:—it would be something like cowardice to fight with a man who had never exercised the weapons with which his opponent chose to combat, and irksome to refute sentence after sentence in which the latent spirit of tyranny appeared.

I perceive, from the whole tenor of your Reflections, that you have a mortal antipathy to reason; but, if there is any thing like argument, or first principles, in your wild declamation, behold the result:—that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience: nay, that, if we do discover some errors, our *feelings* should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days. These are gothic<sup>5</sup> notions of beauty—the ivy is beautiful, but, when it insidiously destroys the trunk from which it receives support, who would not grub it up?

Further, that we ought cautiously to remain for ever in frozen inactivity, because a thaw, whilst it nourishes the soil, spreads a temporary inundation; and the fear of risking any personal present

convenience should prevent a struggle for the most estimable advantages. This is sound reasoning, I grant, in the mouth of the rich and short-sighted.

Yes, Sir, the strong gained riches, the few have sacrificed the many to their vices; and, to be able to pamper their appetites, and supinely exist without exercising mind or body, they have ceased to be men.—Lost to the relish of true pleasure, such beings would, indeed, deserve compassion, if injustice was not softened by the tyrant's plea—necessity; if prescription was not raised as an immortal boundary against innovation. Their minds, in fact, instead of being cultivated, have been so warped by education, that it may require some ages to bring them back to nature, and enable them to see their true interest, with that degree of conviction which is necessary to influence their conduct.

The civilization which has taken place in Europe has been very partial, and, like every custom that an arbitrary point of honour has established, refines the manners at the expence of morals, by making sentiments and opinions current in conversation that have no root in the heart, or weight in the cooler resolves of the mind.—And what has stopped its progress?—hereditary property—hereditary honors. The man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born, and the consequent homage that benumbed his faculties like the torpedo's<sup>6</sup> touch;—or a being, with a capacity of reasoning, would not have failed to discover, as his faculties unfolded, that true happiness arose from the friendship and intimacy which can only be enjoyed by equals; and that charity is not a condescending distribution of alms, but an intercourse of good offices and mutual benefits, founded on respect for justice and humanity.

\* \* \*

It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in

receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights.

A father may dissipate his property without his child having any right to complain;—but should he attempt to sell him for a slave, or fetter him with laws contrary to reason; nature, in enabling him to discern good from evil, teaches him to break the ignoble chain, and not to believe that bread becomes flesh, and wine blood, because his parents swallowed the Eucharist with this blind persuasion.

There is no end to this implicit submission to authority—some where it must stop, or we return to barbarism; and the capacity of improvement, which gives us a natural sceptre on earth, is a cheat, an ignis-fatuus,<sup>2</sup> that leads us from inviting meadows into bogs and dung-hills. And if it be allowed that many of the precautions, with which any alteration was made, in our government, were prudent, it rather proves its weakness than substantiates an opinion of the soundness of the stamina, or the excellence of the constitution.

But on what principle Mr. Burke could defend American independence, I cannot conceive; for the whole tenor of his plausible arguments settles slavery on an everlasting foundation. Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, the slave trade ought never to be abolished; and, because our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country, and a proper submission to the laws by which our property is secured.—Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed.—The Briton takes place of the man, and the image of God is lost in the citizen! But it is not that enthusiastic flame which in Greece and Rome consumed every sordid passion: no, self is the focus; and the disparting rays rise not above our foggy atmosphere. But softly—it is only the property of the rich that is secure; the man who lives by the sweat of his brow has no asylum from oppression; the strong man may enter—when

was the castle of the poor sacred? and the base informer steal him from the family that depend on his industry for subsistence.

\* \* \*

But, among all your plausible arguments, and witty illustrations, your contempt for the poor always appears conspicuous, and rouses my indignation. The following paragraph in particular struck me, as breathing the most tyrannic spirit, and displaying the most factitious feelings. "Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people, without being servile, must be tractable and obedient. The magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They *must* respect that property of which they *cannot* partake. *They must labor to obtain what by labor can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavor, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice.* Of this consolation, whoever deprives them, deadens their industry, and strikes at the root of all acquisition as of all conservation. He that does this, is the cruel oppressor, the merciless enemy, of the poor and wretched; at the same time that, by his wicked speculations, he exposes the fruits of successful industry, and the accumulations of fortune, (ah! there's the rub)<sup>8</sup> to the plunder of the negligent, the disappointed, and the unprosperous."

This is contemptible hard-hearted sophistry, in the specious form of humility, and submission to the will of Heaven.—It is, Sir, *possible* to render the poor happier in this world, without depriving them of the consolation which you gratuitously grant them in the next. They have a right to more comfort than they at present enjoy; and more comfort might be afforded them, without encroaching on the pleasures of the rich: not now waiting to enquire whether the rich have any right to exclusive pleasures. What do I say?—encroaching! No; if an intercourse were established between them, it would

impart the only true pleasure that can be snatched in this land of shadows, this hard school of moral discipline.

I know, indeed, that there is often something disgusting in the distresses of poverty, at which the imagination revolts, and starts back to exercise itself in the more attractive Arcadia of fiction. The rich man builds a house, art and taste give it the highest finish. His gardens are planted, and the trees grow to recreate the fancy of the planter, though the temperature of the climate may rather force him to avoid the dangerous damps they exhale, than seek the umbrageous retreat. Every thing on the estate is cherished but man;—yet, to contribute to the happiness of man, is the most sublime of all enjoyments. But if, instead of sweeping pleasure-grounds, obelisks, temples, and elegant cottages,<sup>9</sup> as *objects* for the eye, the heart was allowed to beat true to nature, decent farms would be scattered over the estate, and plenty smile around. Instead of the poor being subject to the griping hand of an avaricious steward, they would be watched over with fatherly solicitude, by the man whose duty and pleasure it was to guard their happiness, and shield from rapacity the beings who, by the sweat of their brow, exalted him above his fellows.

I could almost imagine I see a man thus gathering blessings as he mounted the hill of life; or consolation, in those days when the spirits lag, and the tired heart finds no pleasure in them. It is not by squandering alms that the poor can be relieved, or improved—it is the fostering sun of kindness, the wisdom that finds them employments calculated to give them habits of virtue, that meliorates their condition. Love is only the fruit of love; condescension and authority may produce the obedience you applaud; but he has lost his heart of flesh who can see a fellow-creature humbled before him, and trembling at the frown of a being, whose heart is supplied by the same vital current, and whose pride ought to be checked by a consciousness of having the same infirmities.

\* \* \*



## Endnotes

- Note 1: Conceal the truth with elaborate sentence structures.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Shakespeare's *King Lear* 4.1.57.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Chinese pagodas were popular ornaments in late 18th-century British landscaping.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: As religion is included in my idea of morality, I should not have mentioned the term without specifying all the simple ideas which that comprehensive word generalizes; but as the charge of atheism has been very freely banded about in the letter I am considering, I wish to guard against misrepresentation [*Wollstonecraft's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Barbarous.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Electric ray, a fish with a whiplike tail that gives an electric shock to those it touches.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The phosphorescent light (also known as will o' the wisp) that is said to appear in marshy landscapes and lead travelers off the path of safety.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Compare Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 3.1.67. The "rub" is the flaw in the reasoning.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A reference to the vogue for picturesque landscaping on aristocratic estates.[Return to reference 9](#)



## THOMAS PAINE

Although he was born and lived his first thirty-seven years in England, Thomas Paine (1737–1809) enters the debate as a visitor from America, where by writing *Common Sense* (1776) and the sixteen *Crisis* pamphlets, beginning “These are the times that try men’s souls” (1776–83), he had served as the most effective propagandist for American independence. His *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke’s Attack on the French Revolution*, published in March 1791 with a dedication “To George Washington, President of the United States of America,” has the full weight of the American revolutionary experience behind it and is the strongest statement against hereditary monarchy of any of the works replying to Burke in this “war of pamphlets.” Paine published a second part of *Rights of Man* the following year and, when charged with treason by the British, fled to France, where he was made a citizen and a member of the Convention. With the fall of the more moderate Girondists, he was imprisoned by the Jacobins for a year in 1793–94, during which he wrote his last famous work, *The Age of Reason* (1794).

## ***From Rights of Man***

Among the incivilities by which nations or individuals provoke and irritate each other, Mr. Burke's pamphlet on the French Revolution is an extraordinary instance. Neither the people of France, nor the National Assembly, were troubling themselves about the affairs of England, or the English Parliament; and why Mr. Burke should commence an unprovoked attack upon them, both in parliament and in public, is a conduct that cannot be pardoned on the score of manners, nor justified on that of policy.

There is scarcely an epithet of abuse to be found in the English language with which Mr. Burke has not loaded the French nation and the National Assembly. Every thing which rancor, prejudice, ignorance or knowledge could suggest, are poured forth in the copious fury of near four hundred pages. In the strain and on the plan Mr. Burke was writing, he might have written on to as many thousands. When the tongue or the pen is let loose in a frenzy of passion, it is the man, and not the subject, that becomes exhausted.

Hitherto Mr. Burke has been mistaken and disappointed in the opinions he had formed of the affairs of France; but such is the ingenuity of his hope, or the malignancy of his despair, that it furnishes him with new pretences to go on. There was a time when it was impossible to make Mr. Burke believe there would be any revolution in France. His opinion then was, that the French had neither spirit to undertake it, nor fortitude to support it; and now that there is one, he seeks an escape by condemning it.

\* \* \*

There never did, there never will, and there never can exist a parliament, or any description of men, or any generation of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding and controuling posterity to the "*end of time*," or of commanding for

ever how the world shall be governed, or who shall govern it; and therefore, all such clauses, acts or declarations, by which the makers of them attempt to do what they have neither the right nor the power to do, nor the power to execute, are in themselves null and void.—Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow. The parliament or the people of 1688, or of any other period, had no more right to dispose of the people of the present day, or to bind or to controul them *in any shape whatever*, than the parliament or the people of the present day have to dispose of, bind or controul those who are to live a hundred or a thousand years hence. Every generation is, and must be, competent to all the purposes which its occasions require. It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated. When man ceases to be, his power and his wants cease with him; and having no longer any participation in the concerns of this world, he has no longer any authority in directing who shall be its governors, or how its government shall be organized, or how administered.

I am not contending for nor against any form of government, nor for nor against any party here or elsewhere. That which a whole nation chooses to do, it has a right to do. Mr. Burke says, No. Where then *does* the right exist? I am contending for the rights of the *living*, and against their being willed away, and controuled and contracted for, by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead; and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living.

\* \* \*

“We have seen,” says Mr. Burke, “the French rebel against a mild and lawful Monarch, with more fury, outrage, and insult, than any people has been known to rise against the most illegal usurper, or the most

sanguinary tyrant.”—This is one among a thousand other instances, in which Mr. Burke shews that he is ignorant of the springs and principles of the French revolution.

It was not against Louis the XVIth, but against the despotic principles of the government, that the nation revolted. These principles had not their origin in him, but in the original establishment, many centuries back; and they were become too deeply rooted to be removed, and the augean stable<sup>1</sup> of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by any thing short of a complete and universal revolution. When it becomes necessary to do a thing, the whole heart and soul should go into the measure, or not attempt it. That crisis was then arrived, and there remained no choice but to act with determined vigor, or not to act at all. The King was known to be the friend of the nation, and this circumstance was favorable to the enterprise. Perhaps no man bred up in the style of an absolute King, ever possessed a heart so little disposed to the exercise of that species of power as the present King of France. But the principles of the government itself still remained the same. The Monarch and the monarchy were distinct and separate things; and it was against the established despotism of the latter, and not against the person or principles of the former, that the revolt commenced, and the revolution has been carried.

Mr. Burke does not attend to the distinction between *men* and *principles*; and therefore, he does not see that a revolt may take place against the despotism of the latter, while there lies no charge of despotism against the former.

The natural moderation of Louis the XVIth contributed nothing to alter the hereditary despotism of the monarchy. All the tyrannies of former reigns, acted under that hereditary despotism, were still liable to be revived in the hands of a successor. It was not the respite of a reign that would satisfy France, enlightened as she was then become. A casual discontinuance of the *practice* of despotism, is not a discontinuance of its *principles*; the former depends on the virtue of the individual who is in immediate possession of power; the latter, on the virtue and fortitude of the nation. In the case of

Charles I and James II of England,<sup>2</sup> the revolt was against the personal despotism of the men; whereas in France, it was against the hereditary despotism of the established government. But men who can consign over the rights of posterity for ever on the authority of a moldy parchment, like Mr. Burke, are not qualified to judge of this revolution. It takes in a field too vast for their views to explore, and proceeds with a mightiness of reason they cannot keep pace with.

But there are many points of view in which this revolution may be considered. When despotism has established itself for ages in a country, as in France, it is not in the person of the King only that it resides. It has the appearance of being so in show, and in nominal authority; but it is not so in practice, and in fact. It has its standard every where. Every office and department has its despotism founded upon custom and usage. Every place has its Bastille,<sup>3</sup> and every Bastille its despot. The original hereditary despotism resident in the person of the King, divides and subdivides itself into a thousand shapes and forms, till at last the whole of it is acted by deputation. This was the case in France; and against this species of despotism, proceeding on through an endless labyrinth of office till the source of it is scarcely perceptible, there is no mode of redress. It strengthens itself by assuming the appearance of duty, and tyrannises under the pretence of obeying.

When a man reflects on the condition which France was in from the nature of her government, he will see other causes for revolt than those which immediately connect themselves with the person or character of Louis XVI. There were, if I may so express it, a thousand despotisms to be reformed in France, which had grown up under the hereditary despotism of the monarchy, and became so rooted as to be in a great measure independent of it. Between the monarchy, the parliament, and the church, there was a *rivalship* of despotism; besides the feudal despotism operating locally, and the ministerial despotism operating every where. But Mr. Burke, by considering the King as the only possible object of a revolt, speaks as if France was a village, in which every thing that passed must be

known to its commanding officer, and no oppression could be acted but what he could immediately control. Mr. Burke might have been in the Bastille his whole life, as well under Louis XVI as Louis XIV and neither the one nor the other have known that such a man as Mr. Burke existed. The despotic principles of the government were the same in both reigns, though the dispositions of the men were as remote as tyranny and benevolence.

What Mr. Burke considers as a reproach to the French Revolution (that of bringing it forward under a reign more mild than the preceding ones), is one of its highest honors. The revolutions that have taken place in other European countries, have been excited by personal hatred. The rage was against the man, and he became the victim. But, in the instance of France, we see a revolution generated in the rational contemplation of the rights of man, and distinguishing from the beginning between persons and principles.

But Mr. Burke appears to have no idea of principles, when he is contemplating governments. "Ten years ago," says he, "I could have felicitated France on her having a government, without enquiring what the nature of that government was, or how it was administered." Is this the language of a rational man? Is it the language of a heart feeling as it ought to feel for the rights and happiness of the human race? On this ground, Mr. Burke must compliment every government in the world, while the victims who suffer under them, whether sold into slavery, or tortured out of existence, are wholly forgotten. It is power, and not principles, that Mr. Burke venerates; and under this abominable depravity, he is disqualified to judge between them.—Thus much for his opinion as to the occasions of the French Revolution.

\* \* \*

As to the tragic paintings by which Mr. Burke has outraged his own imagination, and seeks to work upon that of his readers, they are very well calculated for theatrical representation, where facts are manufactured for the sake of show, and accommodated to produce,

through the weakness of sympathy, a weeping effect. But Mr. Burke should recollect that he is writing History, and not *Plays*; and that his readers will expect truth, and not the spouting rant of high-toned exclamation.

When we see a man dramatically lamenting in a publication intended to be believed, that, "*The age of chivalry is gone! that The glory of Europe is extinguished for ever! that The unbought grace of life* (if any one knows what it is), *the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize, is gone!*" and all this because the Quixote<sup>4</sup> age of chivalric nonsense is gone, What opinion can we form of his judgment, or what regard can we pay to his facts? In the rhapsody of his imagination, he has discovered a world of windmills, and his sorrows are, that there are no Quixotes to attack them. But if the age of aristocracy, like that of chivalry, should fall, and they had originally some connection, Mr. Burke, the trumpeter of the Order, may continue his parody to the end, and finish with exclaiming, "*Othello's occupation's gone!*"<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding Mr. Burke's horrid paintings, when the French Revolution is compared with that of other countries, the astonishment will be, that it is marked with so few sacrifices; but this astonishment will cease when we reflect that *principles*, and not *persons*, were the meditated objects of destruction. The mind of the nation was acted upon by a higher stimulus than what the consideration of persons could inspire, and sought a higher conquest than could be produced by the downfall of an enemy. \* \* \*

1791

## Endnotes

- Note 1: King Augeas's stable, housing three thousand oxen and neglected for decades, was a classical symbol of filth and corruption. Hercules cleaned it by changing the course of a river.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Charles I was overthrown in the Civil Wars and executed in 1649. His son, James II, was dethroned in the Glorious

Revolution of 1688.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: France's political prison (where the French Revolution began on July 14, 1789).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Insanely idealistic; from the hero of Cervantes' romance, who famously mistakes windmills for his foes the giants.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Shakespeare's *Othello* 3.3.362; Othello's feeling, when he thinks Desdemona has been unfaithful, that his life is over.[Return to reference 5](#)



## JAMES GILLRAY

In the mid-eighteenth century, the artist William Hogarth's success with the prints he called his "modern moral subjects" had demonstrated that people who trained as engravers could be something more than practitioners of a mechanical art, replicating in reproducible form the paintings of others. They could also claim considerable moral authority as witty social critics. Satiric prints in the tradition Hogarth helped establish were a thriving commercial concern by the time the twenty-one-year old James Gillray (1757–1815) enrolled (along with William Blake) as a student of engraving at the Royal Academy of Art. Especially popular at this time were political caricatures, the form of portraiture, deftly balanced between a realistic visual idiom and a grotesque one, that continues to be used to pillory public figures and their pretensions. Straitlaced foreign visitors frequently marveled over the laughing crowds that would gather around the windows of the London print shops where these were displayed. By the end of the 1780s, Gillray, originally from a working-class family, had become a celebrity thanks to the verve with which he captured the likenesses of politicians—even the Royal Family—in etched portraits that comically heightened the physical particularities that made them their distinct selves. With the outbreak of the French Revolution, these images also proved well suited to registering the yawning gap between the high-minded idealism of the revolutionaries and the sordid realities of their Revolution. The imaginative power that infused Gillray's depictions of French revolutionists and their English sympathizers struck many as the equivalent in visual art to the verbal art that Thomas Paine had complained about in his encounter with "Mr. Burke's horrid paintings." It is not surprising therefore to learn that after 1797 Gillray was secretly on the government payroll, for assisting in the campaign to discredit the radical opposition. Still, with their characteristic mix of fury and glee, his prints make it difficult for

attentive viewers to pin down his political allegiances. Straightforward propaganda they are not. Unbalanced, blending in a combustible compound the high-minded history paintings Gillray studied at the Royal Academy and the crude energies of popular culture, these images can throw us off balance in our turn.



***Smelling out a Rat;—or The Atheistical Revolutionist disturbed in his Midnight Calculations.*** Published December 3, 1790. This print commemorating the attack on Richard Price that Burke made in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was etched only six months after Gillray engraved James Northcote's heroic painting of the liberation of the Bastille prisoners (see color insert). That Gillray had since then changed sides in the Revolution Controversy, falling in line with Burke's equation of the Revolution with destruction not salvation, is suggested by the print's title and many details. The painting on the wall behind Price's desk depicts the beheading of England's King Charles I in the Civil Wars of the 1640s. On the study floor Price's offending sermon lies beside a book with the seditious title *Treatise . . . on the Absurdity of Serving God and Honoring the King*. But how sincere was Gillray's newfound allegiance to Burke, given that an outsize nose and spectacles here make Burke appear a fanatical monster? Price, only lightly caricatured, may be the rat of the title but he has been permitted to retain his humanity.





**French Liberty, British Slavery.** Published December 21, 1792. In this well-known image, which reappeared as a decoration gracing porcelain mugs and jugs, Gillray pairs scenes of dining and self-mythologizing. The shabby, emaciated Frenchman munches raw scallions, to be followed by a course of snails (creeping out of the pot on the left), while rhapsodizing joyously about how as “free citizens” now he and his compatriots “swim in de Milk & Honey.” A world away, an obese Englishman stuffs himself on roast beef while bemoaning his government’s tax rates: “they’re making Slaves of all, & Starving us to Death!” A figurine of Britannia is behind his right shoulder, a money bag replacing her usual shield.





***The Zenith of French Glory;—The Pinnacle of Liberty.***

Published February 12, 1793. The news that reached London on January 24, 1793, of the French National Convention's execution of King Louis XVI three days earlier occasioned this ferocious

print. It shows one of Gillray's specimen sans-culottes enjoying a good view of the guillotine and its royal victim, his right foot set jauntily atop the neck of one of the clergymen who have been strung up below him. (*Sans-culotte* was the usual French designation for a member of the lower classes, because working men wore long trousers instead of the knee-breeches favored by male aristocrats and bourgeois. Gillray delighted in translating the term literally and scurrilously, and the posteriors of his Frenchmen are often visible, as here, through their rags.) In the colored version of the print, the execution platform appears to be located in a lake of blood, the effect of the red caps worn by the mob of sans-culottes who surround it. The cathedral that is in flames and the paper reading "Bon soir Monsieur" ("Good night sir") that has been nailed atop the crucifix on the picture's right add apocalyptic notes to the horror of the scene.

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## The BRITISH-BUTCHER.

Supplying JOHN-BULL with a Substitute for BREAD. Vide Message to Lord Mayor.

Pub<sup>d</sup> July 6<sup>th</sup> 1795. by H. Humphrey N<sup>o</sup> 37.  
West-Bond Street.

### BILLY the BUTCHER'S advice to JOHN BULL.

Since Bread is so dear, (and you say you must Eat,  
For to save the Expence, you must live upon Meat;

***The British Butcher, Supplying John Bull with a Substitute for Bread.*** Published July 6, 1795. John Bull, the embodiment of ordinary Englishness, is a stock character in Gillray's prints. Bull is the closest we approach to innocence in Gillray's villainous world and yet he cuts a shambling figure: Gillray portrays him as hopelessly susceptible to politicians' manipulations. This print was published at the height of a food shortage brought on by a bad harvest and exacerbated by the demands of the war against France. Prime Minister Pitt is pictured as a butcher, arrogantly explaining to his customer John Bull that because he cannot afford bread, he must accept meat: "A Crown, take it or leave it." The posters that are pasted on the side of Pitt's butcher's block and that juxtapose the prices for provisions with the monthly wages for working men suggest Bull's problem: either he can starve or he can obtain higher wages by enlisting as a soldier for the Crown and so risk being butchered himself. In a similar scene involving this duo, from November 1796, Gillray pictures the prime minister holding a money-bag and saying, "More Money John! to defend you from the Bloody, the Cannibal French . . . They're a coming!" The caption tells us that Bull, imaged with his trousers in his hand, is "giving his Breeches to save his Bacon": a hint that Bull may turn sans-culotte himself.

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# **THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION**

## BRYAN EDWARDS

The wealthy planter Bryan Edwards (1743–1800), author of several works on the history and economy of the West Indies, was widely regarded by contemporaries as a leading authority on the region. Born in England, as an adolescent he was sent to live with an uncle in Jamaica, from whom he inherited a number of estates. In 1791, Edwards heard with alarm of an uprising of enslaved persons in the nearby French colony of St.-Domingue. Traveling to the island with a convoy of British warships bringing aid to the White colonists, Edwards was astonished to find a “dreadful scene of devastation by fire,” with the rebels in control of large swaths of the countryside. London papers ran his sensational eyewitness accounts of the rebellion in 1791, and Edwards drew on these in his *Historical Survey of the French Colony of Saint Domingo* (1797), from which we take our excerpt. In rhetoric that echoes Edmund Burke’s rendering of the anarchic violence of the French Revolution, Edwards plays up the spectacle of a terrified White minority threatened by a much larger Black population: his narrative focuses on individual European families while casting the insurgents as a menacing “savage horde” incited by the zealotry of British abolitionists and French revolutionary propagandists. As a member of Parliament in the later 1790s, Edwards defended the interests of West Indian planters in debates with William Wilberforce and other abolitionists.



## ***From An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of Saint Domingo***

\* \* \* Every writer must rise or sink, in some degree, with the nature of his subject; and on this occasion, the picture which I shall exhibit, has nothing in it to delight the fancy, or to gladden the heart. The prospects before us are all dark and dismal. Here is no room for tracing the beauties of unsullied nature. Those groves of perennial verdure; those magnificent and romantick landscapes, which, in tropical regions, every where invite the eye, and oftentimes detain it, until wonder is exalted to devotion, must now give place to the miseries of war, and the horrors of pestilence; to scenes of anarchy, desolation, and carnage. We have to contemplate the human mind in its utmost deformity; to behold savage man, let loose from restraint, exercising cruelties, of which the bare recital makes the heart recoil, and committing crimes which are hitherto unheard of in history; teeming

\_\_\_\_\_ all monstrous, all prodigious things,  
Abominable, unutterable, and worse  
Than fables yet have feign'd, or fear conceiv'd!

MILTON.<sup>1</sup>

All therefore that I can hope and expect is, that my narrative, if it cannot delight, may at least *instruct*. On the sober and considerate, on those who are open to conviction, this assemblage of horrors will have its effect.<sup>2</sup> It will expose the lamentable ignorance of some, and the monstrous wickedness of others, among the reformers of the present day, who, urging onwards schemes of perfection, and projects of amendment in the condition of human life, faster than nature allows, are lighting up a consuming fire between the different classes of mankind, which nothing but human blood can extinguish.<sup>3</sup>

To tell such men that great and beneficial modifications in the established orders of society, can only be effected by a progressive improvement in the situation of the lower ranks of the people, is to preach to the winds. In their hands reformation, with a scythe more destructive than that of time, mows down every thing, and plants nothing. Moderation and caution they consider as rank cowardice. Force and violence are the ready, and, in their opinion, the only proper application for the cure of early and habitual prejudice. Their practice, like that of other mountebanks, is bold and compendious; their motto is, *care or kill*.

These reflections naturally arise from the circumstance which is incontrovertibly proved in the following pages, namely, that the rebellion of the negroes in St. Domingo, and the insurrection of the mulattoes, to whom Ogè was sent as ambassador, had one and the same origin.<sup>4</sup> It was not the strong and irresistible impulse of human nature, groaning under oppression, that excited either of those classes to plunge their daggers into the bosoms of unoffending women and helpless infants. They were driven into those excesses—reluctantly driven—by the vile machinations of men calling themselves philosophers (the proselytes and imitators in France, of the Old Jewry associates in London) whose pretences to philanthropy were as gross a mockery of human reason, as their conduct was an outrage on all the feelings of our nature, and the ties which hold society together!<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

I am now to enter on the retrospect of scenes, the horrors of which imagination cannot adequately conceive nor pen describe. \* \*

\* Such a picture of human misery;—such a scene of woe, presents itself, as no other country, no former age has exhibited. Upwards of one hundred thousand savage people, habituated to the barbarities of Africa, avail themselves of the silence and obscurity of the night, and fall on the peaceful and unsuspecting planters, like so many famished tygers thirsting for human blood.<sup>6</sup> Revolt, conflagration,

and massacre, every where mark their progress; and death, in all its horrors, or cruelties and outrages, compared to which immediate death is mercy, await like the old and the young, the matron, the virgin, and the helpless infant. No condition, age, or sex is spared. All the shocking and shameful enormities, with which the fierce and unbridled passions of savage man have ever conducted a war, prevail uncontrouled. The rage of fire consumes what the sword is unable to destroy, and, in a few dismal hours, the most fertile and beautiful plains in the world are converted into one vast field of carnage;—a wilderness of desolation!<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

The rebellion first broke out on a plantation called *Noé*, in the parish of *Acul*, nine miles only from the city.<sup>8</sup> Twelve or fourteen of the ring-leaders, about the middle of the night, proceeded to the refinery, or sugar-house, and seized on a young man, the refiner's apprentice, dragged him to the front of the dwelling-house, and there hewed him into pieces with their cutlasses: his screams brought out the overseer, whom they instantly shot. The rebels now found their way to the apartment of the refiner, and massacred him in his bed. A young man lying sick in a neighbouring chamber, was left apparently dead of the wounds inflicted by their cutlasses: he had strength enough however to crawl to the next plantation, and relate the horrors he had witnessed. He reported, that all the whites of the estate which he had left were murdered, except only the surgeon, whom the rebels had compelled to accompany them, on the idea that they might stand in need of his professional assistance. Alarmed by this intelligence, the persons to whom it was communicated immediately sought their safety in flight. What became of the poor youth I have never been informed.

\* \* \*

It was computed that, within two months after the revolt first began, upwards of two thousand white persons, of all conditions and ages, had been massacred;—that one hundred and eighty sugar plantations, and about nine hundred coffee, cotton, and indigo settlements had been destroyed (the buildings thereon being consumed by fire), and one thousand two hundred christian families reduced from opulence, to such a state of misery as to depend altogether for their clothing and sustenance on publick and private charity. Of the insurgents, it was reckoned that upwards of ten thousand had perished by the sword or by famine; and some hundreds by the hands of the executioner;—many of them, I am sorry to say, under the torture of the wheel;—a system of revenge and retaliation, which no enormities of savage life could justify or excuse.<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: From the description of the deathly hellscape confronting the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* 2.625–27.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The “horrors” Edwards has in mind are those suffered by White colonists, rather than the horrors of slavery itself. The “horrors of St. Domingo” would become conventional shorthand for the threat of violence against White colonists, later applied to the massacres of White families under Jean-Jacques Dessalines, as in the 1808 novel *Secret History, or The Horrors of St. Domingo*, by Leonora Sansay.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Playing into anti-Jacobin rhetoric of the 1790s, Edwards lumps partisans of French revolutionary principles together with British abolitionists: in its early reporting on the insurrection in 1791, the *Times* of London even ran an outrageous story of rebel slaves dancing around effigies of the leading abolitionist William Wilberforce.[Return to reference 3](#)



- Note 4: In St.-Domingue, the social group Edwards calls “mulattoes” were known as *gens de couleur libres*, or free persons of color, who had both European and African ancestry; many free persons of color were among the colony’s leading families, though in the later 18th century they had been subject to intensifying codes of racial distinction. Vincent Ogè the younger (1757–1791), a free person of color and businessman from a wealthy family, was sentenced to public torture and execution for his role in a 1790 rebellion.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: London’s Old Jewry Street was the location of the headquarters of Britain’s primary abolitionist organization, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787. The French Société des Amis des Noirs (Society of the Friends of the Blacks), founded in 1788, was in close correspondence with leading British abolitionists; it numbered among its members many notables of French society.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Edwards’s dehumanizing language identifies Africa with barbarism and casts enslaved Africans as beastlike. The metaphor reinforces a common line of argument used against calls for emancipation: the idea that freeing slaves would mean unshackling a bloodthirsty mass. Edwards similarly stressed his notion of African “barbarism” in his debates in Parliament with Wilberforce and others.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: St.-Domingue had been known as the “Pearl of the Antilles” for the wealth generated by its fertile plantations—worked, of course, through slave labor.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In August 1791, two large secret meetings of enslaved persons from many plantations preceded a coordinated uprising in the island’s northern province, its most productive.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Captured insurgents were tortured and executed, their bodies physically broken on the wheel, a medieval mode of torture still in use in Europe in the 18th century.[Return to reference 9](#)

## MARCUS RAINSFORD

The Irish-born officer Marcus Rainsford's service with the British army included battling the American colonials in the American War of Independence, fighting the French in the Netherlands, and recruiting Black troops in Jamaica to aid the British occupation of St.-Domingue. In 1798, a ship on which he was traveling, blown off course by a hurricane, landed unexpectedly at Le Cap, St.-Domingue's principal city. The unplanned visit gave Rainsford a firsthand look at the colony under Toussaint's leadership, and a stock of stories on which he could dine out once back in London. During the lead-up to Napoleon's invasion of the island in 1802, Rainsford further capitalized on the material by publishing an account of his adventures that ran through several editions. In 1805, the year after Dessalines was crowned Emperor Jacques I, Rainsford published a full-fledged *Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, from which we take our excerpt. Rainsford's perspective contrasts tellingly with that of Edwards. Though he voices no objection to slavery as an institution, Rainsford is supportive of Haitian independence and paints an especially flattering picture of Toussaint, whom he credited with rescuing him from a death sentence as a suspected spy for the British. Rainsford's writing was a key contribution to the growing mythology around the revolutionary hero.

## ***From An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti***

It has frequently been the fate of striking events, and particularly those which have altered the condition of mankind, to be denied that consideration by their cotemporaries, which they obtain from the veneration of posterity. In their vortex, attention is distracted by the effects; and distant society recedes from the contemplation of objects that threaten a violation of their system, or wound a favourite prejudice. It is thus that history, with all the advantages of calm discussion, is imperfect; and philosophy enquires in vain for the unrecorded causes of astonishing transactions.

To remedy the evil in this enlightened era, the disquisitions of the observer, and the relations of the traveller occur; but these are perused with the rapidity, with which they are necessarily made, and, although they teach us what regards our own nature, impress no other sense of the period described, than as relates to the fleeting objects of immediate import—furnishing, therefore, little more (if so much may always be expected) than frail documents for the judgment of the future historian.

Such is precisely the case with the subject of the following pages. The rise of the Haytian empire is an event which may powerfully affect the condition of the human race; yet it is viewed as an ordinary succession of triumphs and defeats, interrupted only by the horrors of new and terrible inflictions, the fury of the contending elements, and destructive disease, more tremendous than all.

It will scarcely be credited in another age, that philosophers heard unmoved, of the ascertainment of a brilliant fact, hitherto unknown, or confined to the vague knowledge of those whose experience is not admitted within the pale of historical truth. It will not be believed, that enlightened Europe calmly witnessed its

contrasted brilliancy with actions which, like the opaque view of night, for a sullen hour obscured the dazzling splendour.

It is on ancient record, that negroes were capable of repelling their enemies, with vigour, in their own country; and a writer of modern date<sup>1</sup> has ensured us of the talents and virtues of these people; but it remained for the close of the eighteenth century to realize the scene, from a state of abject degeneracy:—to exhibit, a horde of negroes emancipating themselves from the vilest slavery, and at once filling the relations of society, enacting laws, and commanding armies, in the colonies of Europe.

The same period has witnessed a great and polished nation, not merely returning to the barbarism of the earliest periods, but descending to the characters of assassins and executioners; and, removing the boundaries which civilization had prescribed even to war, rendering it a wild conflict of brutes and a midnight massacre.<sup>2</sup>

To attract a serious attention to circumstances, which constitute an era in the history of human nature and of martial affairs, is the purpose of the present disquisition; which, it is hoped, will tend to furnish an awful, yet practical lesson, as well as to excite and gratify a laudable curiosity.

\* \* \*

To avoid the suspicion in which, notwithstanding the recent treaty, the English yet continued to be viewed, and to prevent the probability of injury to his companions, the writer was induced to assume the character of an American, which was easy to be effected, as the vessel was ultimately bound to that continent.<sup>3</sup> The crew were permitted to land after certain ceremonies, and the first object which excited their attention, was no less than the hero of this novel empire.<sup>4</sup> Toussaint was conversing with two privates of his forces on the batteries, and when he saw the Europeans approaching, immediately walked towards them, and, addressing them in French, inquired the news, from whence they came, and their destination. One served as respondent for the whole, who

spoke in such terms as his character demanded, and the General civilly took his leave.

The number of Americans at this port could not fail to attract particular notice, and every attention seemed to be paid to the accommodation of their commerce, and a striking degree of interest in every occurrence that concerned them. Even the women seemed to renew a fondness long repressed for the whites, in favor of the meanest of the American sailors. The present writer, however, requiring some rest after his recent voyage, hastened, on receiving his directions to the purpose, to the Hotel de la Republique, the principal house, usually resorted to by Americans, an edifice of rather elegant appearance; and on his way, except the preponderancy of the black complexion, perceived but little difference from an European city. On entering the house, however, he immediately perceived that the usual subordinations of society were entirely disregarded, and that he was to witness, for the first time, a real system of equality.

Here were officers and privates, the colonel and the drummer, at the same table indiscriminately; and the writer had been scarcely seated at a repast in the first room to which he was conducted, when a fat negro, to initiate him in the general system, helped himself frequently from his dish, and took occasion to season his character by large draughts of the wine, accompanied with the address of "Mon Americain." The appearance of the house, and its accommodations, were not much inferior to a London coffee-house, and on particular occasions exhibited a superior degree of elegance. Toussaint not unfrequently dined here himself, but he did not sit at the head of the table, from the idea, (as was asserted,) that the hours of refection and relaxation should not be damped by the affected forms of the old regimen, and that no man should assume a real superiority in any other place than the field. He was in the evenings at the billiard-table, where the writer conversed and played with him several times; and he could not help, on some occasions, when a want of etiquette disturbed him for a moment, congratulating himself, that if he experienced not the refinement of

European intercourse, he saw no room for insincerity: and that if delicate converse did not always present itself, he was free from the affectation of sentiment.

In traversing the once superb city of the Cape,<sup>5</sup> though presenting a tolerable appearance from the shore, desolation every where presented itself. On the site where elegant luxury had exhausted its powers to delight the voluptuary, all was magnificent ruin! and to mark the contrast stronger, of the wrecks were composed temporary houses for the American merchants, and petty shops inhabited by the natives. Several spacious streets towards the centre, displayed the walls of superb edifices of five and six stories, with gilded balconies, of which the beautiful structure exhibited the devastation that had occurred, with additional horror. Nor was this all, for in different parts of these ruins the sad remains of the former possessors were visibly mingled with the crumbling walls:

“There—heedless of the dead,  
The shelter-seeking peasant rears his shed,  
And wonders man could want the larger pile.”<sup>6</sup>

Having been informed of a review which was to take place on the plain of the Cape, the writer availed himself of the opportunity, accompanied by some Americans, and a few of his own countrymen who resided there under that denomination. Of the grandeur of the scene he had not the smallest conception. Two thousand officers were in the field, carrying arms, from the general to the ensign, yet with the utmost attention to rank; without the smallest symptom of the insubordination that existed in the leisure of the hotel. Each general officer had a demi-brigade,<sup>7</sup> which went through the manual exercise with a degree of expertness seldom witnessed, and performed equally well several manœuvres applicable to their method of fighting. At a whistle a whole brigade ran three or four hundred yards, then separating, threw themselves flat on the ground, changing to their backs or sides, keeping up a strong fire the whole of the time, till they were recalled; they then formed

again, in an instant, into their wonted regularity. This single manœuvre was executed with such facility and precision, as totally to prevent cavalry from charging them in bushy and hilly countries. Such complete subordination, such promptitude and dexterity, prevailed the whole time, as would have astonished any European soldier who had the smallest idea of their previous situation.<sup>8</sup>

The pleasing sensations inspired by the ability manifested in this review, were checked by the additional monuments of human ferocity which presented themselves on his return to the city; the conflagration of which, and of the surrounding plantations, was still in the memory of several Americans, who described the effect, as awfully grand beyond conception.

In one of the squares in the north-west quarter was placed an edifice that made some amends for the desolation appearing in its vicinity, from the elegance of its execution. It was an ascent to a canopy, or dome, of which the architecture was not perfectly regular, beneath which were two seats, and above them an inscription, that eminently exhibited the tolerance of Toussaint. There were two centinels to guard it, who, being asked if any one might ascend the steps, answered in the affirmative, but with a strict prohibition against touching the cap of liberty, which crowned it.<sup>9</sup> It was a tribute of respect to the memory of Sonthonax and Polverel, the French commissioners, and had been erected by some of their advocates at a time when their largesses obtained for them what they would not otherwise have enjoyed, a transitory popularity.<sup>1</sup> An extract from a speech of one of them formed part of the inscription, in French, and which countenanced the opinion, that the abolition of slavery was a primary object of their mission. It was to the following effect:

My Friends,  
We came to make you free.  
Frenchmen give Liberty to the World.  
You are free.  
Guard your Freedom.

Vive la Liberté.

Vive la Republique.

Vive Robespierre.<sup>2</sup>

The remainder of the inscription consisted of a selection from the proclamation for abolishing slavery. The prevailing opinion of these men, notwithstanding they had been execrated for their conduct, was favourable to their talents, and to their spirit.

\* \* \*

1805

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Rainsford cites the French natural historian and explorer Michel Adanson (1727–1806), who traveled to Senegal in 1749–54.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Rainsford alludes to the bloody excesses of the French Revolution in the 1790s, with its “midnight massacres” and Reign of Terror, but his history also documents the atrocities and crimes of war carried out by French soldiers against Black troops and civilians in St.-Domingue in 1802–03, when the French forces acted with what some have described as a genocidal fervor.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Our excerpt picks up Rainsford’s narrative with his accidental, shipwrecked arrival in the city of Le Cap, also known as Cap- Français. The treaty to which Rainsford refers was concluded between Toussaint and the British general Thomas Maitland following secret negotiations, with Toussaint exercising his own diplomatic initiative. Signed August 31, 1798, the agreement ended hostilities and established trade relations between Britain and Saint Domingo, effectively recognizing Toussaint as the island’s authority.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Rainsford’s language is romantic: St.-Domingue was still at this point a French colony; Haiti would name itself an “empire” under Dessalines in 1804.[Return to reference 4](#)



- Note 5: Though much impacted by the years of fighting, at the close of the 18th century Le Cap, or “the Cape,” was a cosmopolitan city famed for its theater and its cultural life, with a number of publishers of books and newspapers.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: From Oliver Goldsmith’s lament over the ruins of Italy’s past glory in *The Traveller, or the Prospect of Society* (1764), lines 160–62.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A demi-brigade was a type of military unit originating with the French revolutionary army; a brigade is a unit of typically several thousand soldiers.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Toussaint was renowned for the military discipline of the soldiers under his command. Rainsford, who had fought alongside and recruited Black troops, here implicitly refutes Bryan Edwards’s repeated insistence that Black soldiers inherently lacked discipline and fought “irregularly.”[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Popularized as a symbol of freedom in the French Revolution, the liberty cap or “bonnet rouge” also has historical connections to the Roman caps worn by manumitted slaves.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Léger Félicité Sonthonax (1763–1813) and Étienne Polverel (1740–1795) served as the French Republic’s civil commissioners for St.-Domingue from 1792 to 1794. In 1793, Sonthonax issued a proclamation abolishing slavery in the northern section of Domingue over which he had jurisdiction (enacting the “largesse” to which Rainsford refers).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: “Long live liberty, long live the Republic, and long live [Maximilien] Robespierre,” the French radical who presided over the Reign of Terror, then fell to the guillotine himself in July 1794.[Return to reference 2](#)

# TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE

Officially the product of a committee appointed by Toussaint, St.-Domingue's Constitution of 1801 is often referred to as "Toussaint's Constitution," the name it was typically given in the English-language press. When American and British newspapers first published the document, it was often accompanied by a character sketch of Toussaint. Born around 1743, the future general grew up in slavery on a plantation near Le Cap, gaining manumission in the 1770s. The first recorded instance of his use of the name "Louverture"—"the opening"—is in a letter issued the same day the French authorities in the colony abolished slavery, inviting fellow rebels to unite with him in fighting for freedom: "I am Toussaint Louverture. My name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken to avenge you. I want liberty and equality to reign throughout St.-Domingue." At the time, Toussaint was officially allied with the Spanish king against France, although he would publicly throw his support to the French Republican side in 1794. A brilliant military tactician, statesman, and political thinker, Toussaint also masterfully orchestrated political theater, using speeches, correspondence, print publication, pageantry and ceremony, and his personal charisma strategically to shape his public persona, move audiences, and sideline rivals.

Toussaint's Constitution marks the remarkable revolution by which a society that just a decade earlier had been structured entirely around the institution of race-based slavery now, under the leadership of a Black insurgent, declares slavery and all racial distinction "abolished forever." At the same time, aiming for stability, the Constitution defines the colony as "free and French," and envisions citizenship on a paternalistic model of the family, with Toussaint established as leader for life. The Constitution was issued without Napoleon's prior approval, and provoked an outraged response: when Toussaint saw the size of the fleet Napoleon had sent to re-assert his authority, Toussaint is said to have remarked

that “all of France has come to St.-Domingue.” Seeing no military way out, Toussaint soon negotiated a peaceful surrender, but was taken prisoner and brought to a French dungeon in the Jura Mountains near the Swiss border, where he died from pneumonia in 1803. The text of this English translation of the Constitution is taken from the London *Morning Post*, Oct. 8, 1801.



**"Toussaint Louverture, chief of the Black rebels of Saint Domingue."** This print was issued in Paris around 1802. Mounted on horseback and attired in elegant military dress, the

revolutionary leader displays an air of valor and decisive command.

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# ***From Constitution of the French Colony of St. Domingo***

The deputies of the departments of the colony of St. Domingo, assembled in a General Meeting, have decreed and fixed the Constitutional Basis of a System for the French colony of St. Domingo.

## ***I. Territory.***

Art. 1. St. Domingo, in all its extent, as well as Samana, Turtle Island, Gonava, the Caimites, Heifer Island, La Saone, and the other adjacent islands, form the territory of a single colony, which makes a part of the French empire, but is governed by particular laws.

2. The territory of this colony is divided into departments, circles, or districts, and parishes.

## ***II. Inhabitants.***

3. Slaves are not permitted in this territory.—Slavery is abolished for ever; all men, born in this country, live and die freemen and Frenchmen.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

4. Every man, of whatsoever colour he may be, is eligible to all places.

5. There is no distinction but that of virtue and talents, and no superiority but what the law confers by the exercise of some public function. The law is the same to all, whether it protects or punishes.

## ***III. Religion.***

6. The Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion is the only one publicly professed.<sup>[2](#)</sup>

\* \* \*

#### ***IV. Morals.***

9. Marriage, by its political and religious institution, tends to purify the public morals. Those who practise the virtues which it enjoins, will be at all times distinguished, and particularly protected by the government.

10. Divorce is not permitted in this colony.

11. The condition and the rights of children, born out of marriage, will be determined by laws made to extend and preserve the social virtues, as well as to encourage and strengthen the union of families.

\* \* \*

#### ***VI. Agriculture and Commerce.***

14. The country being essentially agricultural, cannot suffer the smallest interruption in the labours of its cultivators.

15. Every habitation is a manufacture, which obtains the union of the proprietor and the cultivators; it is the tranquil asylum of an industrious and well-regulated family, of which the proprietor of the soil, or his representative, is necessarily the father.

16. Every cultivator is a member of this family, and is entitled to a share in its revenues. Every change that is made in a habitation by the part of the cultivator tends to its ruin. In order to repress a vice equally fatal to the colony, and opposite to the public good, the Governor has made all the regulations of police which circumstances require, and which are founded on the regulations of the 12th October, 9th year, and on the proclamation of 8th February, published by General Toussaint Louverture.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

#### ***VIII. Government.***

27. The administration of the government of the colonies is confided to the Governor, who corresponds with the government of



the mother country concerning every thing which relates to the interests of the colonies.

28. The Constitution names as Governor Citizen Toussaint Louverture, General in Chief of the Army of St. Domingo; and, in consideration of the important services rendered by this General to the colony in the most critical circumstances of the revolution, and of his having acted to the satisfaction of a grateful people, the reins of government are entrusted to him for the whole of his glorious life.<sup>4</sup>

29. In future every Governor will be appointed for six years; and if his administration in that period be approved, he will be continued in office.

30. In order to secure the tranquillity which the colony owes to the firmness, the activity, the indefatigable zeal and rare virtues of General Toussaint Louverture, and as a pledge of the boundless confidence of the inhabitants of St. Domingo, the Constitution reserves exclusively to this General, in case of the cruel event of his death, the right of chusing his immediate successor. This choice shall be secret: it shall be inclosed in a sealed packet, which shall be opened only by the Central Assembly, in presence of all the Generals of the Army of St. Domingo in actual service, and of the Commander in Chief of the departments. General Toussaint will take all the necessary precautions to enable the Central Assembly to find the place where he shall have deposited this packet.

31. The Citizen who shall be chosen by Citizen Louverture to receive the reins of Government after his death, will, in the presence of the Central Assembly, take the oath to execute the Constitution of St. Domingo, and to remain faithful to the French Government, and he will then be immediately installed. The whole will be done in the presence of the Generals of the Army in actual service, and of the Commanders in Chief of the departments, who shall all, individually and collectively, take the oath of obedience to the new Governor, without quitting the place.

\* \* \*



## Endnotes

- Note 1: In the French original, the second sentence of this article reads “Tous les hommes y naissent, vivent et meurent libres et français,” or “Here, all men are born, live and die free and French”—an echo and rewriting of the famous first sentence of the first article of France’s 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man: “All men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Toussaint himself was devoutly Catholic.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Controversially, the Constitution shores up the existing plantation system—imagined on a familial model—by attaching laborers to the land on which they were formerly enslaved. Toussaint viewed the plantation system as crucial to restoring the colony’s agricultural productivity, but others at the time, and some historians since, viewed these provisions strictly binding workers to plantations as reintroducing forced labor and a form of secondary citizenship, though workers received compensation.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The Constitution pointedly refers to General Toussaint as “citizen”—in the language of the French Republic—even as it declares him leader for the remainder of his “glorious life” and gives him the power to choose his successor (in an echo of Napoleon’s consolidation of power in his own person in France).[Return to reference 4](#)

## **JEAN-JACQUES DESSALINES, HENRI CHRISTOPHE, AND AUGUSTIN CLERVEAUX**

Though for a time after Toussaint's capture some of his former commanders cooperated with the French authorities, relations quickly deteriorated. Many assumed the French would reimpose slavery, as they did in 1802 in the nearby colony of Guadeloupe. The struggle against slavery then became a war of independence, even survival. Heading the newly named Armée Indigène, or Indigenous Army, in this fight was the famed general Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who would become the first leader of the new nation of Haiti. Born around 1758 in either West Africa or St.-Domingue (the historical record is unclear), Dessalines spent most of his life before the 1791 insurrection enslaved on a sugar plantation under a brutal White master; joining the rebels, he rose through the ranks under Toussaint. In this proclamation, dated shortly after the decisive defeat of the French at the Battle of Vertières on November 18, Dessalines and his fellow generals declare the island independent "in the name of the Blacks and men of color" (the term *gens de couleur* designated persons of mixed European and African ancestry). The proclamation's other signatories are Augustin Clerveaux (1763–1804), a free person of color, and Henri Christophe (1767–1820), who from 1811 would be King Henry I of Haiti and, like Dessalines, had been formerly enslaved. As the scholar Deborah Jenson argues, however, the document is consonant in style with proclamations Dessalines issued solely under his own name.

Though no French original has been found, this declaration was widely printed (sometimes under the heading "in translation") in American newspapers in January 1804 and in British newspapers in February, a time lag reflecting its overseas travel. By the time it appeared in the foreign press, Dessalines had already issued the New Year's Day declaration from which Haiti conventionally dates its

independence. Dessalines, who ruled in authoritarian style, would be assassinated in 1806.

# **Declaration of the Independence of the Blacks of St. Domingo**

## ***Proclamation of Dessalines, Christophe, and Clervaux, Chiefs of St. Domingo***

In the Name of the Black People, and Men of Color of St. Domingo:<sup>1</sup>

The Independence of St. Domingo is proclaimed. Restored to our primitive<sup>2</sup> dignity, we have asserted our rights; we swear never to yield them to any power on earth; the frightful veil of prejudice is torn to pieces, be it so for ever. Woe be to them who would dare, to put together its bloody tatters.

Oh! Landholders of St. Domingo, wandering in foreign countries, by proclaiming our independence, we do not forbid you, indiscriminately, from returning to your property; far be from us this unjust idea.<sup>3</sup> We are not ignorant that there are some among you that have renounced their former errors, abjured the injustice of their exorbitant pretensions, and acknowledged the lawfulness of the cause for which we have been spilling our blood these twelve years.<sup>4</sup> Toward those men who do us justice, we will act as brothers; let them rely for ever on our esteem and friendship; let them return among us. The God who protects us, the God of Freeman, bids us to stretch out towards them our conquering arms. But as for those, who, intoxicated with foolish pride, interested slaves of a guilty pretension, are blinded so much as to believe themselves the essence of human nature, and assert that they are destined by heaven to be our masters and our tyrants, let them never come near the land of St. Domingo: if they come hither, they will only meet with chains or deportation; then let them stay where they are; tormented by their well-deserved misery, and the frowns of the just men whom they have too long mocked, let them still continue to move, unpitied and unnoticed by all.<sup>5</sup>

We have sworn not to listen with clemency towards all those who would dare to speak to us of slavery; we will be inexorable, perhaps even cruel, towards all troops who, themselves forgetting the object for which they have not ceased fighting since 1789,<sup>6</sup> should come from Europe to bring among us death and servitude. Nothing is too dear, and all means are lawful, to men from whom it is wished to tear the first of all blessings.<sup>7</sup> Were they to cause rivers and torrents of blood to run; were they, in order to maintain their liberty, to conflagrate seven eighths of the globe, they are innocent before the tribunal of Providence, that never created men, to see them groaning under so harsh and shameful a servitude.<sup>8</sup>

In the various commotions that took place, some inhabitants against whom we had not to complain, have been victims by the cruelty of a few soldiers or cultivators, too much blinded by the remembrance of their past sufferings to be able to distinguish the good and humane land-owners from those that were unfeeling and cruel, we lament with all feeling souls so deplorable an end, and declare to the world, whatever may be said to the contrary by wicked people, that the murders were committed contrary to the wishes of our-hearts. It was impossible, especially in the crisis in which the colony was, to be able to prevent or stop those horrors. They who are in the least acquainted with history, know that a people, when assailed by civil dissensions, though they may be the most polished on earth, give themselves up to every species of excess, and the authority of the chiefs, at that time not firmly supported, in a time of revolution cannot punish all that are guilty, without meeting with new difficulties.<sup>9</sup> But now a-days the Aurora<sup>1</sup> of peace hails us, with the glimpse of a less stormy time; now that the calm of victory has succeeded to the trouble of a dreadful war, every thing in St. Domingo ought to assume a new face, and its government henceforward be that of justice.

Done at the Head-Quarters, Fort Dauphin, November 29, 1803.

(Signed)

DESSALINES.  
CHRISTOPHE.  
CLERVEAUX.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The proclamation casts “Black People, and Men of Color” as speaking with one voice, despite the tension and mistrust that had historically existed between those social groups in St.-Domingue. Seeking to affirm Haitian identity while outlawing racial distinction, the nation’s 1805 constitution would define all Haitian citizens as “Black,” regardless of ancestry or skin color.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In the sense of original.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Addressing plantation owners who had fled to America, Europe, and elsewhere in the West Indies.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, since the uprising of 1791.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: This sentence at once turns the language of slavery back on would-be enslavers—so they themselves are described as slaves to their greed and mistaken worldview—and exposes the logic by which one group legitimates its subjugation of others by identifying itself alone as “the essence of human nature.”[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The French Revolution began in 1789 with calls for universal liberty and equality.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Echoing the revolutionists’ phrase “Liberty or Death!” with which Dessalines routinely prefaced official statements.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The language is that of biblical apocalypse: in Revelation 16:1–9, angels pouring out the “wrath of God upon the earth” turn rivers to blood and scorch the world with fire.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The victorious generals appear here to distance themselves from what they characterize as unlawful violence, while pointedly reminding their audience of the excesses witnessed in a European capital such as Paris under the Terror.

In 1804, a series of massacres of Whites of French descent was carried out under the authority of Dessalines (Whites of other national origin were not attacked). In Dessalines' later proclamations, including the "Liberty or Death!" declaration of April 28, 1804, defending the massacres as a necessary step against perceived "internal enemies" of the nation, the defense of rights is more directly combined with the language of avenging wrongs.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Roman goddess of dawn.[Return to reference 1](#)

# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

## 1759–1797

Mary Wollstonecraft's father inherited a substantial fortune and set himself up as a gentleman farmer. He was, however, both extravagant and incompetent, and as one farm after another failed, he became moody and violent and sought solace in heavy bouts of drinking and in tyrannizing his submissive wife. Mary was the second of five children and the oldest daughter. She later told her husband, William Godwin, that she used to throw herself in front of her mother to protect her from her father's blows, and that she sometimes slept outside the door of her parents' bedroom to intervene if her father should break out in a drunken rage. The solace of Mary's early life was her fervent attachment to Fanny Blood, an accomplished girl two years her senior; their friendship, which began when Mary was sixteen, endured and deepened until Fanny's death.

At the age of nineteen, Mary Wollstonecraft left home to take a position as companion to a well-to-do widow living in Bath, where for the first time she had the opportunity to observe—and scorn—the social life of the upper classes at the most fashionable of English resort cities. Having left her job in 1780 to nurse her dying mother through a long and harrowing illness, Wollstonecraft next went to live with the Bloods, where her work helped sustain the struggling family. Her sister Eliza meanwhile had married and, in 1784, after the birth of a daughter, suffered a nervous breakdown. Convinced



that her sister's collapse was the result of her husband's cruelty and abuse, Wollstonecraft persuaded her to abandon husband and child and flee to London. Because a divorce at that time was not commonly available, and a fugitive wife could be forced to return to her husband, the two women hid in secret quarters while awaiting the grant of a legal separation. The infant, automatically given into the father's custody, died before she was a year old.

The penniless women, together with Fanny Blood and Wollstonecraft's other sister, Everina, established a girls' school at Newington Green, near London. The project flourished at first, and at Newington, Wollstonecraft was befriended by the Reverend Richard Price, the radical author who was soon to play a leading role in the British debates about the Revolution in France, and whose kindly guidance helped shape her social and political opinions. Blood, although already ill with tuberculosis, went to Lisbon to marry her longtime suitor, Hugh Skeys, and quickly became pregnant. Wollstonecraft rushed to Lisbon to attend her friend's childbirth, only to have Fanny die in her arms; the infant died soon afterward. The loss threw Wollstonecraft (already subject to bouts of depression) into black despair, which was heightened when she found that the school at Newington was in bad financial straits and had to be closed. Tormented by creditors, she rallied her energies to write her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786), a conventional and pious series of essays, and took up a position as governess for several daughters in the Anglo-Irish family of Viscount Kingsborough, a man of great wealth whose seat was in County Cork, Ireland.

The Kingsboroughs were well intentioned and did their best to introduce Wollstonecraft into the busy trivialities of their social life. But the ambiguity of her position as governess, halfway between a servant and a member of the family, was galling. An antagonism developed between Wollstonecraft and Lady Kingsborough, in part because the children feared their mother and adored their governess. Wollstonecraft was dismissed. She returned to London, where Joseph Johnson in 1788 published *Mary, a Fiction*, a novel, as

Wollstonecraft described it, about “the mind of a woman who has thinking powers.” Johnson also published her book for children, *Original Stories from Real Life*, a considerable success that was translated into German and quickly achieved a second English edition illustrated with engravings by William Blake. Wollstonecraft was befriended and subsidized by Johnson, the major publisher in England of radical and reformist books, and she took a prominent place among the writers (including notables such as Barbauld and Coleridge) whom he regularly entertained at his rooms in St. Paul’s Churchyard. She published translations from French and German (she had taught herself both languages) and began reviewing books for Johnson’s newly founded journal, the *Analytical Review*. Though still in straitened circumstances, she helped support her two sisters and her improvident and importunate father and was also generous with funds—and with advice—to one of her brothers and to the indigent family of Fanny Blood.

In 1790 Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—an eloquent and powerful attack on the French Revolution and its English sympathizers—quickly evoked Wollstonecraft’s response, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. This was a formidable piece of argumentation; its most potent passages represent the disabilities and sufferings of the English lower classes and impugn the motives and sentiments of Burke. This work, the first book-length reply to Burke, scored an immediate success, although it was soon submerged in the flood of other replies, most notably Thomas Paine’s classic *Rights of Man* (1791–92). In 1792 Wollstonecraft focused her defense of the underprivileged on her own sex and wrote, in six weeks of intense effort, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Earlier writers in both France and England had proposed that, given equivalent educations, women would equal men in achievement. Wollstonecraft was particularly indebted to the historian Catharine Macaulay, whose *Letters on Education* (1790) she had reviewed enthusiastically. At the same time Wollstonecraft was contributing to a long-running discussion of human rights that in

Britain dated back to John Locke's publication of the *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690). Prefaced with a letter addressed to the French politician Bishop Talleyrand, the *Vindication* was in part her rejoinder to the inconsistent actions of France's National Assembly, which in 1791 had formally denied to all Frenchwomen the rights of citizens, even as, ironically enough, it set about celebrating the "universal rights of man."

Her book was also unprecedented in its firsthand observations of the disabilities and indignities suffered by women and in the articulateness and passion with which it exposed and decried this injustice. Wollstonecraft's views were conspicuously radical at a time when women had no political rights; were limited to a few lowly vocations as servants, nurses, governesses, and petty shopkeepers; and were legally nonpersons who lost their property to their husbands at marriage and were incapable of instituting an action in the courts of law. An impressive feature of her book, for all its vehemence, is the clear-sightedness and balance of her analysis of the social conditions of the time, as they affect men as well as women. She perceives that women constitute an oppressed class that cuts across the standard hierarchy of social classes; she shows that women, because they are denied their rights as human beings, have been forced to seek their ends by means of coquetry and cunning, the weapons of the weak; and having demonstrated that it is contrary to reason to expect virtue from those who are not free, she also recognizes that men, no less than women, inherit their roles, and that the wielding of irresponsible power corrupts the oppressor no less than it distorts the oppressed. Hence her surprising and telling comparisons between women on the one hand and men of the nobility and military on the other as classes whose values and behavior have been distorted because their social roles prevent them from becoming fully human. In writing this pioneering work, Wollstonecraft found the cause that she was to pursue the rest of her life.

In December 1792 Wollstonecraft went to Paris to observe the Revolution firsthand. During the years that she lived in France,

1793–94, the early period of moderation was succeeded by extremism and violence. In Paris she joined a group of English, American, and European expatriates sympathetic to the Revolution and fell in love with Gilbert Imlay, a personable American who had briefly been an officer in the American Revolutionary Army and was the author of a widely read book on the Kentucky backwoods, where he had been an explorer. He played the role in Paris of an American frontiersman and child of nature, but was in fact an adventurer who had left America to avoid prosecution for debt and for freewheeling speculations in Kentucky land. He was also unscrupulous in his relations with women. The two became lovers, and their daughter, Fanny Imlay, was born in May 1794. Imlay, who was often absent on mysterious business deals, left mother and daughter for a visit to London that he kept protracting. After the publication of her book *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), Wollstonecraft followed Imlay to London, where, convinced that he no longer loved her, she tried to commit suicide. The attempt, however, was discovered and prevented by Imlay. To get her out of the way, he persuaded her to take a trip as his business envoy to the Scandinavian countries. Although this was then a region of poor or impassible roads and primitive accommodations, the intrepid Wollstonecraft traveled there for four months, sometimes in the wilds, accompanied by the year-old Fanny and a French nursemaid.

Back in London, Wollstonecraft discovered that Imlay was living with a new mistress, an actress. Finally convinced he was lost to her, she hurled herself from a bridge into the Thames but was rescued by a passerby. Imlay departed with his actress to Paris. Wollstonecraft, resourceful as always, used the letters she had written to Imlay to compose a book, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), full of sharp observations of politics, the lives of Scandinavian women, and the austere northern landscape.

In the same year Wollstonecraft renewed an earlier acquaintance with the philosopher William Godwin. His *Enquiry Concerning*

*Political Justice* (1793), the most drastic proposal for restructuring the political and social order yet published in England, together with his novel of terror, *Caleb Williams* (1794), which embodies his social views, had made him the most famed radical writer of his time. The austere rationalistic philosopher, then forty years of age, had an unexpected capacity for deep feeling, and what began as a flirtation soon ripened into affection and (as their letters show) passionate physical love. She wrote Godwin, with what was for the time remarkable outspokenness on the part of a woman: "Now by these presents [that is, this document] let me assure you that you are not only in my heart, but my veins, this morning. I turn from you half abashed—yet you haunt me, and some look, word or touch thrills through my whole frame. . . . When the heart and reason accord there is no flying from voluptuous sensations, do what a woman can." Wollstonecraft was soon pregnant once more, and Godwin (who had in his *Enquiry* attacked the institution of marriage as a base form of property rights in human beings) braved the ridicule of his radical friends and conservative enemies by marrying her.

They set up a household together, but Godwin also kept separate quarters in which to do his writing, and they further salvaged their principles by agreeing to live separate social lives. Wollstonecraft was able to enjoy this arrangement for only six months. She began writing *The Wrongs of Woman*, a novel about marriage and motherhood that uses its Gothic setting inside a dilapidated madhouse to explore how women are confined both by unjust marriage laws and by their own romantic illusions. On August 30, 1797, she gave birth to a daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later the author of *Frankenstein* and wife of Percy Shelley. The delivery was not difficult, but resulted in massive blood poisoning. After ten days of agony, she lapsed into a coma and died. Her last whispered words were about her husband: "He is the kindest, best man in the world." Godwin wrote to a friend, announcing her death: "I firmly believe that there does not exist her equal in the world. I know from experience we were formed to make each other happy."

To distract himself in his grief, Godwin published in 1798 *Memoirs of the Author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,"* in which he told, with the total candor on which he prided himself, of her affairs with Imlay and himself, her attempts at suicide, and her freethinking in matters of religion and sexual relationships. In four companion volumes of her *Posthumous Works*, he indiscreetly included her love letters to Imlay along with the unfinished *Wrongs of Woman*. The reaction to these revelations was immediate and ugly. The conservative satirist the Reverend Richard Polwhele, for instance, remarked gloatingly on how it appeared to him providential that as a proponent of sexual equality Wollstonecraft should have died in childbirth—"a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women, and the diseases to which they are liable." The unintended consequence of Godwin's candor was that Wollstonecraft came to be saddled with a scandalous reputation so enduring that through the Victorian era advocates of the equality of women circumspectly avoided explicit reference to her *Vindication*. Even John Stuart Mill, in his *Subjection of Women* (1869), neglected to mention the work. It was only in the twentieth century, and especially in the later decades, that Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* gained recognition as a classic in the literature not only of women's rights but of social analysis as well.

***From A Vindication of the Rights of  
Woman***

## **From *The Dedication to M. Talleyrand-Périgord*<sup>1</sup>**

\* \* \*

Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good? If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations.

In this work I have produced many arguments, which to me were conclusive, to prove that the prevailing notion respecting a sexual<sup>2</sup> character was subversive of morality, and I have contended, that to render the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail, and that chastity will never be respected in the male world till the person of a woman is not, as it were, idolized, when little virtue or sense embellish it with the grand traces of mental beauty, or the interesting simplicity of affection.

Consider, Sir, dispassionately, these observations—for a glimpse of this truth seemed to open before you when you observed, 'that to see one half of the human race excluded by the other from all participation of government, was a political phænomenon that, according to abstract principles, it was impossible to explain.' If so, on what does your constitution rest?<sup>3</sup> If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test: though a different



opinion prevails in this country, built on the very arguments which you use to justify the oppression of woman—prescription.<sup>4</sup>

Consider, I address you as a legislator, whether, when men contend for their freedom, and to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own happiness, it be not inconsistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their happiness? Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?

In this style, argue tyrants of every denomination, from the weak king to the weak father of a family; they are all eager to crush reason; yet always assert that they usurp its throne only to be useful. Do you not act a similar part, when you *force* all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families groping in the dark? for surely, Sir, you will not assert, that a duty can be binding which is not founded on reason? If indeed this be their destination, arguments may be drawn from reason: and thus augustly supported, the more understanding women acquire, the more they will be attached to their duty—comprehending it—for unless they comprehend it, unless their morals be fixed on the same immutable principle as those of man, no authority can make them discharge it in a virtuous manner. They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.

But, if women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason—else this flaw in your NEW CONSTITUTION will ever shew that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant, and tyranny, in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front, will ever undermine morality.

I have repeatedly asserted, and produced what appeared to me irrefragable arguments drawn from matters of fact, to prove my assertion, that women cannot, by force, be confined to domestic concerns; for they will, however ignorant, intermeddle with more weighty affairs, neglecting private duties only to disturb, by cunning

tricks, the orderly plans of reason which rise above their comprehension.

Besides, whilst they are only made to acquire personal accomplishments, men will seek for pleasure in variety, and faithless husbands will make faithless wives; such ignorant beings, indeed, will be very excusable when, not taught to respect public good, nor allowed any civil rights, they attempt to do themselves justice by retaliation.

The box of mischief thus opened in society,<sup>5</sup> what is to preserve private virtue, the only security of public freedom and universal happiness?

Let there be then no coercion *established* in society, and the common law of gravity prevailing, the sexes will fall into their proper places. And, now that more equitable laws are forming your citizens, marriage may become more sacred: your young men may choose wives from motives of affection, and your maidens allow love to root out vanity.

The father of a family will not then weaken his constitution and debase his sentiments, by visiting the harlot, nor forget, in obeying the call of appetite, the purpose for which it was implanted. And, the mother will not neglect her children to practise the arts of coquetry, when sense and modesty secure her the friendship of her husband.

But, till men become attentive to the duty of a father, it is vain to expect women to spend that time in their nursery which they, 'wise in their generation,'<sup>6</sup> choose to spend at their glass; for this exertion of cunning is only an instinct of nature to enable them to obtain indirectly a little of that power of which they are unjustly denied a share: for, if women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and themselves vicious, to obtain illicit privileges.

I wish, Sir, to set some investigations of this kind afloat in France; and should they lead to a confirmation of my principles, when your constitution is revised the Rights of Woman may be respected, if it be fully proved that reason calls for this respect, and loudly demands Justice for one half of the human race.

I am, SIR,  
Your's respectfully,  
M. W.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: In 1791 Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord submitted a report on public education to France's new National Assembly.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Here as elsewhere in the *Vindication*, the word *sexual* is equivalent to the modern term *gender-specific*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In France's Constitution of 1791 only males over twenty-five were citizens. Women were not to get the vote until 1944.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4:  
Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1755 (the later 18th century's authoritative guide to usage) defines *prescription* as "rules produced and authorised by long custom: custom continued till it has the force of law." In her first *Vindication* Wollstonecraft noted how the doctrine of prescription motivated Edmund Burke's antagonism toward the dismantling of inherited privileges in revolutionary France and, accordingly, identified his *Reflections on the Revolution* as championing the rich, who invoke "prescription," she asserted, as "an immortal boundary against innovation."  
[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Refers to the story of Pandora, who in Greek mythology was the first woman, and to her opening of the box that Zeus, king of the gods, had sent down to earth with her. That action released evil into the world.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Luke 16:8: "For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."[Return to reference](#)



## ***Introduction***

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result?—a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.—One cause of this barren blooming<sup>7</sup> I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled<sup>8</sup> by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

In a treatise, therefore, on female rights and manners, the works which have been particularly written for their improvement must not be overlooked; especially when it is asserted, in direct terms, that the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement; that the books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of

Mahometanism, they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings,<sup>9</sup> and not as a part of the human species, when improveable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand.

Yet, because I am a woman, I would not lead my readers to suppose that I mean violently to agitate the contested question respecting the equality or inferiority of the sex; but as the subject lies in my way, and I cannot pass it over without subjecting the main tendency of my reasoning to misconstruction, I shall stop a moment to deliver, in a few words, my opinion.—In the government of the physical world it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated in favour of woman. A degree of physical superiority cannot, therefore, be denied—and it is a noble prerogative! But not content with this natural pre-eminence, men endeavour to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men, under the influence of their senses, pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow creatures who find amusement in their society.

I am aware of an obvious inference:—from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind;—all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine.

This discussion naturally divides the subject. I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties; and

afterwards I shall more particularly point out their peculiar designation.

I wish also to steer clear of an error which many respectable writers have fallen into; for the instruction which has hitherto been addressed to women, has rather been applicable to *ladies*, if the little indirect advice, that is scattered through Sandford and Merton,<sup>1</sup> be excepted; but, addressing my sex in a firmer tone, I pay particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the seeds of false-refinement, immorality, and vanity, have ever been shed by the great. Weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner, undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society! As a class of mankind they have the strongest claim to pity; the education of the rich tends to render them vain and helpless, and the unfolding mind is not strengthened by the practice of those duties which dignify the human character.—They only live to amuse themselves, and by the same law which in nature invariably produces certain effects, they soon only afford barren amusement.

But as I purpose taking a separate view of the different ranks of society, and of the moral character of women, in each, this hint is, for the present, sufficient; and I have only alluded to the subject, because it appears to me to be the very essence of an introduction to give a cursory account of the contents of the work it introduces.

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity

and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.

This is a rough sketch of my plan; and should I express my conviction with the energetic emotions that I feel whenever I think of the subject, the dictates of experience and reflection will be felt by some of my readers. Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style;—I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for, wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods,<sup>3</sup> or in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart.—I shall be employed about things, not words!—and, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation.

These pretty superlatives, dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth; and a deluge of false sentiments and overstretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, render the domestic pleasures insipid, that ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and immortal being for a nobler field of action.

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend



many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments;<sup>4</sup> meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves,—the only way women can rise in the world,—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act:—they dress; they paint, and nickname God’s creatures.<sup>5</sup> Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!<sup>6</sup>—Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?

If then it can be fairly deduced from the present conduct of the sex, from the prevalent fondness for pleasure which takes place of ambition and those nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul; that the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire—mere propagators of fools!—if it can be proved that in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over,<sup>7</sup> I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for endeavouring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable.

Indeed the word masculine is only a bugbear: there is little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude; for their apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength, must render them, in some degree, dependent on men in the various relations of life; but why should it be increased by prejudices that give a sex to virtue, and confound simple truths with sensual reveries?

Women are, in fact, so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence, that I do not mean to add a paradox when I assert, that this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannize, and gives birth to cunning, the natural opponent of strength, which leads them to play off those contemptible infantine airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire. Let men

become more chaste and modest, and if women do not grow wiser in the same ratio, it will be clear that they have weaker understandings. It seems scarcely necessary to say, that I now speak of the sex in general. Many individuals have more sense than their male relatives; and, as nothing preponderates where there is a constant struggle for an equilibrium, without it has naturally more gravity, some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern.

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## Endnotes

- Note 7: Wollstonecraft compares women to “luxuriants,” botanical science’s technical term for those plants that late 18th-century gardeners, drawing on the latest techniques, cultivated for their showy blooms and at the expense of their seeds.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Deluded, cheated (archaic).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: It was a common but mistaken opinion among Europeans that in the Quran, the sacred text of Islam, the Prophet Mohammed taught that women have no souls and would not be permitted an afterlife.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *Sandford and Merton*, a children’s book by Thomas Day (1786–89), is the story of Tommy Merton, a spoiled wealthy child who is befriended by Harry Sandford, a poor but principled lad.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wollstonecraft considers the middle classes to be more “natural” and also more educable than the aristocracy—“the great”—because they are as yet uncorrupted by the artificiality of leisure-class life.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Formulating balanced sentences.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, the lessons in music, dancing, art, and needlework that were central elements in the education provided for genteel young women and that were supposed to

enhance their value on the marriage market.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Shakespeare's Hamlet, charging Ophelia with the faults characteristic of women, says, "you jig, you amble, and you lisp and nickname God's creatures" (*Hamlet* 3.1.143–44).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Harem, the women's quarters in a Muslim household.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A lively writer, I cannot recollect his name, asks what business women turned of forty have to do in the world? [*Wollstonecraft's note*]. Perhaps Wollstonecraft is referring to a passage in Frances Burney's popular novel *Evelina* spoken by the licentious Lord Merton: "I don't know what the devil a woman lives for after thirty: she is only in other folks' way."[Return to reference 7](#)

## **Chapter 2. The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed**

To account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward to prove, that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character: or, to speak explicitly, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue. Yet it should seem, allowing them to have souls, that there is but one way appointed by Providence to lead *mankind* to either virtue or happiness.

If then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence? Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices.—Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives.

Thus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace,<sup>8</sup> I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation.

How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes! For instance, the winning softness so warmly, and frequently, recommended, that governs by obeying.

What childish expressions, and how insignificant is the being—can it be an immortal one? who will condescend to govern by such sinister methods! ‘Certainly,’ says Lord Bacon, ‘man is of kin to the beasts by his body; and if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature!’<sup>9</sup> Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood. Rousseau<sup>1</sup> was more consistent when he wished to stop the progress of reason in both sexes, for if men eat of the tree of knowledge, women will come in for a taste; but, from the imperfect cultivation which their understandings now receive, they only attain a knowledge of evil.<sup>2</sup>

Children, I grant, should be innocent; but when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness. For if it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and by the exercise of their understandings, that stability of character which is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light, and not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a mere satellite. Milton, I grant, was of a very different opinion; for he only bends to the indefeasible right of beauty, though it would be difficult to render two passages which I now mean to contrast, consistent. But into similar inconsistencies are great men often led by their senses.

To whom thus Eve with *perfect beauty* adorn’d.  
My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst  
*Unargued* I obey; So God ordains;  
God is *thy law, thou mine*: to know no more  
Is Woman’s *happiest* knowledge and her *praise*.<sup>3</sup>

These are exactly the arguments that I have used to children; but I have added, your reason is now gaining strength, and, till it arrives at some degree of maturity, you must look up to me for advice—then you ought to *think*, and only rely on God.

Yet in the following lines Milton seems to coincide with me; when he makes Adam thus expostulate with his Maker.

Hast thou not made me here thy substitute,  
And these inferior far beneath me set?  
Among *unequals* what society  
Can sort, what harmony or true delight?  
Which must be mutual, in proportion due  
Giv'n and receiv'd; but in *disparity*  
The one intense, the other still remiss  
Cannot well suit with either, but soon prove  
Tedious alike: of *fellowship* I speak  
Such as I seek, fit to participate  
All rational delight—<sup>4</sup>

In treating, therefore, of the manners of women, let us, disregarding sensual arguments, trace what we should endeavour to make them in order to co-operate, if the expression be not too bold, with the supreme Being.

By individual education, I mean, for the sense of the word is not precisely defined, such an attention to a child as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper,<sup>5</sup> regulate the passions as they begin to ferment, and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity; so that the man may only have to proceed, not to begin, the important task of learning to think and reason.

To prevent any misconception, I must add, that I do not believe that a private education<sup>6</sup> can work the wonders which some sanguine writers have attributed to it. Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it, and given a family character, as it were, to the century. It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education. It is, however, sufficient for my present purpose to assert, that, whatever effect circumstances have on the abilities, every being may

become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason; for if but one being was created with vicious inclinations, that is positively bad, what can save us from atheism? or if we worship a God, is not that God a devil?

Consequently, the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women, and confidently assert that they have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement, and not by an endeavour to acquire masculine qualities. Still the regal homage which they receive is so intoxicating, that till the manners of the times are changed, and formed on more reasonable principles, it may be impossible to convince them that the illegitimate power, which they obtain, by degrading themselves, is a curse, and that they must return to nature and equality if they wish to secure the placid satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart. But for this epoch we must wait—wait, perhaps, till kings and nobles, enlightened by reason, and, preferring the real dignity of man to childish state, throw off their gaudy hereditary trappings: and if then women do not resign the arbitrary power of beauty—they will prove that they have *less* mind than man.

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory,<sup>2</sup> have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society. I might have expressed this conviction in a lower key; but I am afraid it would have been the whine of affectation, and not the faithful expression of my feelings, of the clear result, which experience and reflection have led me to draw. When I come to that division of the subject, I shall advert to the passages that I more particularly disapprove of, in the works of the



authors I have just alluded to; but it is first necessary to observe, that my objection extends to the whole purport of those books, which tend, in my opinion, to degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue.

Though, to reason on Rousseau's ground, if man did attain a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper, in order to make a man and his wife *one*, that she should rely entirely on his understanding; and the graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous. But, alas! husbands, as well as their helpmates, are often only overgrown children; nay, thanks to early debauchery, scarcely men in their outward form—and if the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequence.<sup>8</sup>

Many are the causes that, in the present corrupt state of society, contribute to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses. One, perhaps, that silently does more mischief than all the rest, is their disregard of order.

To do every thing in an orderly manner, is a most important precept, which women, who, generally speaking, receive only a disorderly kind of education, seldom attend to with that degree of exactness that men, who from their infancy are broken into method, observe. This negligent kind of guess-work, for what other epithet can be used to point out the random exertions of a sort of instinctive common sense, never brought to the test of reason? prevents their generalizing matters of fact—so they do to-day, what they did yesterday, merely because they did it yesterday.

This contempt of the understanding in early life has more baneful consequences than is commonly supposed; for the little knowledge which women of strong minds attain, is, from various circumstances, of a more desultory kind than the knowledge of men, and it is acquired more by sheer observations on real life, than from comparing what has been individually observed with the results of experience generalized by speculation. Led by their dependent



situation and domestic employments more into society, what they learn is rather by snatches; and as learning is with them, in general, only a secondary thing, they do not pursue any one branch with that persevering ardour necessary to give vigour to the faculties, and clearness to the judgment. In the present state of society, a little learning is required to support the character of a gentleman; and boys are obliged to submit to a few years of discipline. But in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment; even while enervated by confinement and false notions of modesty, the body is prevented from attaining that grace and beauty which relaxed half-formed limbs never exhibit. Besides, in youth their faculties are not brought forward by emulation; and having no serious scientific study, if they have natural sagacity it is turned too soon on life and manners. They dwell on effects, and modifications, without tracing them back to causes; and complicated rules to adjust behaviour are a weak substitute for simple principles.

As a proof that education gives this appearance of weakness to females, we may instance the example of military men, who are, like them, sent into the world before their minds have been stored with knowledge or fortified by principles. The consequences are similar; soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation, and, from continually mixing with society, they gain, what is termed a knowledge of the world; and this acquaintance with manners and customs has frequently been confounded with a knowledge of the human heart. But can the crude fruit of casual observation, never brought to the test of judgment, formed by comparing speculation and experience, deserve such a distinction? Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same? All the difference that I can discern, arises from the superior advantage of liberty, which enables the former to see more of life.

It is wandering from my present subject, perhaps, to make a political remark; but, as it was produced naturally by the train of my

reflections, I shall not pass it silently over.

Standing armies can never consist of resolute, robust men; they may be well disciplined machines, but they will seldom contain men under the influence of strong passions, or with very vigorous faculties. And as for any depth of understanding, I will venture to affirm, that it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women; and the cause, I maintain, is the same. It may be further observed, that officers are also particularly attentive to their persons, fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule.<sup>9</sup> Like the *fair* sex,<sup>1</sup> the business of their lives is gallantry.—They were taught to please, and they only live to please. Yet they do not lose their rank in the distinction of sexes, for they are still reckoned superior to women, though in what their superiority consists, beyond what I have just mentioned, it is difficult to discover.

The great misfortune is this, that they both acquire manners before morals, and a knowledge of life before they have, from reflection, any acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature. The consequence is natural; satisfied with common nature, they become a prey to prejudices, and taking all their opinions on credit, they blindly submit to authority. So that, if they have any sense, it is a kind of instinctive glance, that catches proportions, and decides with respect to manners; but fails when arguments are to be pursued below the surface, or opinions analyzed.

May not the same remark be applied to women? Nay, the argument may be carried still further, for they are both thrown out of a useful station by the unnatural distinctions established in civilized life. Riches and hereditary honours have made cyphers of women to give consequence to the numerical figure;<sup>2</sup> and idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism into society, which leads the very men who are the slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters. This is only keeping them in rank and file, it is true. Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark,

because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing. The sensualist, indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming that they reigned over them.

I now principally allude to Rousseau, for his character of Sophia<sup>3</sup> is, undoubtedly, a captivating one, though it appears to me grossly unnatural; however it is not the superstructure, but the foundation of her character, the principles on which her education was built, that I mean to attack; nay, warmly as I admire the genius of that able writer, whose opinions I shall often have occasion to cite, indignation always takes place of admiration, and the rigid frown of insulted virtue effaces the smile of complacency, which his eloquent periods are wont to raise, when I read his voluptuous reveries. Is this the man, who, in his ardour for virtue, would banish all the soft arts of peace, and almost carry us back to Spartan discipline? Is this the man who delights to paint the useful struggles of passion, the triumphs of good dispositions, and the heroic flights which carry the glowing soul out of itself?—How are these mighty sentiments lowered when he describes the pretty foot and enticing airs of his little favourite! But, for the present, I wave<sup>4</sup> the subject, and, instead of severely reprehending the transient effusions of overweening sensibility, I shall only observe, that whoever has cast a benevolent eye on society, must often have been gratified by the sight of a humble mutual love, not dignified by sentiment, or strengthened by a union in intellectual pursuits. The domestic trifles of the day have afforded matters for cheerful converse, and innocent caresses have softened toils which did not require great exercise of mind or stretch of thought: yet, has not the sight of this moderate felicity excited more tenderness than respect? An emotion similar to what we feel when children are playing, or animals sporting,<sup>5</sup> whilst the contemplation of the noble struggles of suffering merit has raised admiration, and carried our thoughts to that world where sensation will give place to reason.

Women are, therefore, to be considered either as moral beings, or so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior

faculties of men.

Let us examine this question. Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquetish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries the arguments, which he pretends to draw from the indications of nature, still further, and insinuates that truth and fortitude, the corner stones of all human virtue, should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because, with respect to the female character, obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour.<sup>6</sup>

What nonsense! when will a great man arise with sufficient strength of mind to puff away the fumes which pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject! If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim.

Connected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers, their moral character may be estimated by their manner of fulfilling those simple duties; but the end, the grand end of their exertions should be to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue. They may try to render their road pleasant; but ought never to forget, in common with man, that life yields not the felicity which can satisfy an immortal soul. I do not mean to insinuate, that either sex should be so lost in abstract reflections or distant views, as to forget the affections and duties that lie before them, and are, in truth, the means appointed to produce the fruit of life; on the contrary, I would warmly recommend them, even while I assert, that they afford most satisfaction when they are considered in their true, sober light.

Probably the prevailing opinion, that woman was created for man, may have taken its rise from Moses's poetical story;<sup>7</sup> yet, as very few, it is presumed, who have bestowed any serious thought on the subject, ever supposed that Eve was, literally speaking, one of

Adam's ribs, the deduction must be allowed to fall to the ground; or, only be so far admitted as it proves that man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to shew that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure.

Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. I speak collectively of the whole sex; but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? I must therefore, if I reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God.

It follows then that cunning should not be opposed to wisdom, little cares to great exertions, or insipid softness, varnished over with the name of gentleness, to that fortitude which grand views alone can inspire.

I shall be told that woman would then lose many of her peculiar graces, and the opinion of a well known poet might be quoted to refute my unqualified assertion. For Pope has said, in the name of the whole male sex,

Yet ne'er so sure our passion to create,  
As when she touch'd the brink of all we hate.<sup>8</sup>

In what light this sally places men and women, I shall leave to the judicious to determine; meanwhile I shall content myself with observing, that I cannot discover why, unless they are mortal, females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust.

To speak disrespectfully of love is, I know, high treason against sentiment and fine feelings; but I wish to speak the simple language of truth, and rather to address the head than the heart. To

endeavour to reason love out of the world, would be to out Quixote Cervantes,<sup>9</sup> and equally offend against common sense; but an endeavour to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it should not be allowed to dethrone superior powers, or to usurp the sceptre which the understanding should ever coolly wield, appears less wild.

Youth is the season for love in both sexes; but in those days of thoughtless enjoyment provision should be made for the more important years of life, when reflection takes place of sensation. But Rousseau, and most of the male writers who have followed his steps, have warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point:—to render them pleasing.

Let me reason with the supporters of this opinion who have any knowledge of human nature, do they imagine that marriage can eradicate the habitude of life? The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is passed and gone. Will she then have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort, and cultivate her dormant faculties? or, is it not more rational to expect that she will try to please other men; and, in the emotions raised by the expectation of new conquests, endeavour to forget the mortification her love or pride has received? When the husband ceases to be a lover—and the time will inevitably come, her desire of pleasing will then grow languid, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps, the most evanescent of all passions, gives place to jealousy or vanity.

I now speak of women who are restrained by principle or prejudice; such women, though they would shrink from an intrigue with real abhorrence, yet, nevertheless, wish to be convinced by the homage of gallantry that they are cruelly neglected by their husbands; or, days and weeks are spent in dreaming of the happiness enjoyed by congenial souls till their health is undermined and their spirits broken by discontent. How then can the great art of

pleasing be such a necessary study? it is only useful to a mistress; the chaste wife, and serious mother, should only consider her power to please as the polish of her virtues, and the affection of her husband as one of the comforts that render her task less difficult and her life happier.—But, whether she be loved or neglected, her first wish should be to make herself respectable, and not to rely for all her happiness on a being subject to like infirmities with herself.

The worthy Dr. Gregory fell into a similar error. I respect his heart; but entirely disapprove of his celebrated Legacy to his Daughters.

He advises them to cultivate a fondness for dress, because a fondness for dress, he asserts, is natural to them.<sup>1</sup> I am unable to comprehend what either he or Rousseau mean, when they frequently use this indefinite term.<sup>2</sup> If they told us that in a pre-existent state the soul was fond of dress, and brought this inclination with it into a new body, I should listen to them with a half smile, as I often do when I hear a rant about innate elegance.—But if he only meant to say that the exercise of the faculties will produce this fondness—I deny it.—It is not natural; but arises, like false ambition in men, from a love of power.

Dr. Gregory goes much further; he actually recommends dissimulation, and advises an innocent girl to give the lie to her feelings, and not dance with spirit, when gaiety of heart would make her feel eloquent without making her gestures immodest. In the name of truth and common sense, why should not one woman acknowledge that she can take more exercise than another? or, in other words, that she has a sound constitution; and why, to damp innocent vivacity, is she darkly to be told that men will draw conclusions which she little thinks of?<sup>3</sup>—Let the libertine draw what inference he pleases; but, I hope, that no sensible mother will restrain the natural frankness of youth by instilling such indecent cautions. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh;<sup>4</sup> and a wiser than Solomon<sup>5</sup> hath said, that the heart should be made clean, and not trivial ceremonies observed,<sup>6</sup> which it is not very

difficult to fulfill with scrupulous exactness when vice reigns in the heart.

Women ought to endeavour to purify their heart; but can they do so when their uncultivated understandings make them entirely dependent on their senses for employment and amusement, when no noble pursuit sets them above the little vanities of the day, or enables them to curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed over which every passing breeze has power? To gain the affections of a virtuous man is affectation necessary? Nature has given woman a weaker frame than man; but, to ensure her husband's affections, must a wife, who by the exercise of her mind and body whilst she was discharging the duties of a daughter, wife, and mother, has allowed her constitution to retain its natural strength, and her nerves a healthy tone, is she, I say, to condescend to use art and feign a sickly delicacy in order to secure her husband's affection? Weakness may excite tenderness, and gratify the arrogant pride of man; but the lordly caresses of a protector will not gratify a noble mind that pants for, and deserves to be respected. Fondness is a poor substitute for friendship!

In a seraglio, I grant, that all these arts are necessary; the epicure must have his palate tickled, or he will sink into apathy; but have women so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition? Can they supinely dream life away in the lap of pleasure, or the languor of weariness, rather than assert their claim to pursue reasonable pleasures and render themselves conspicuous by practising the virtues which dignify mankind? Surely she has not an immortal soul who can loiter life away merely employed to adorn her person, that she may amuse the languid hours, and soften the cares of a fellow-creature who is willing to be enlivened by her smiles and tricks, when the serious business of life is over.

Besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband; and if she, by possessing such substantial qualities, merit his regard, she will not find it necessary to conceal her affection, nor to pretend



to an unnatural coldness of constitution to excite her husband's passions. In fact, if we revert to history, we shall find that the women who have distinguished themselves have neither been the most beautiful nor the most gentle of their sex.

Nature, or, to speak with strict propriety, God, has made all things right; but man has sought him out many inventions to mar the work. I now allude to that part of Dr. Gregory's treatise, where he advises a wife never to let her husband know the extent of her sensibility or affection.<sup>7</sup> Voluptuous precaution, and as ineffectual as absurd.—Love, from its very nature, must be transitory. To seek for a secret that would render it constant, would be as wild a search as for the philosopher's stone, or the grand panacea:<sup>8</sup> and the discovery would be equally useless, or rather pernicious to mankind. The most holy band of society is friendship. It has been well said, by a shrewd satirist, "that rare as true love is, true friendship is still rarer."<sup>9</sup>

This is an obvious truth, and the cause not lying deep, will not elude a slight glance of inquiry.

Love, the common passion, in which chance and sensation take place of choice and reason, is, in some degree, felt by the mass of mankind; for it is not necessary to speak, at present, of the emotions that rise above or sink below love. This passion, naturally increased by suspense and difficulties, draws the mind out of its accustomed state, and exalts the affections; but the security of marriage, allowing the fever of love to subside, a healthy temperature is thought insipid, only by those who have not sufficient intellect to substitute the calm tenderness of friendship, the confidence of respect, instead of blind admiration, and the sensual emotions of fondness.

This is, must be, the course of nature.—Friendship or indifference inevitably succeeds love.—And this constitution seems perfectly to harmonize with the system of government which prevails in the moral world. Passions are spurs to action, and open the mind; but they sink into mere appetites, become a personal and momentary gratification, when the object is gained, and the satisfied mind rests

in enjoyment. The man who had some virtue whilst he was struggling for a crown, often becomes a voluptuous tyrant when it graces his brow; and, when the lover is not lost in the husband, the dotard, a prey to childish caprices, and fond jealousies, neglects the serious duties of life, and the caresses which should excite confidence in his children are lavished on the overgrown child, his wife.

In order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments which form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean to say, that they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society, and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed. The mind that has never been engrossed by one object wants vigour—if it can long be so, it is weak.

A mistaken education, a narrow, uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices, tend to make women more constant than men; but, for the present, I shall not touch on this branch of the subject. I will go still further, and advance, without dreaming of a paradox, that an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother.<sup>1</sup> And this would almost always be the consequence if the female mind were more enlarged: for, it seems to be the common dispensation of Providence, that what we gain in present enjoyment should be deducted from the treasure of life, experience; and that when we are gathering the flowers of the day and revelling in pleasure, the solid fruit of toil and wisdom should not be caught at the same time. The way lies before us, we must turn to the right or left; and he who will pass life away in bounding from one pleasure to another, must not complain if he acquire neither wisdom nor respectability of character.

Supposing, for a moment, that the soul is not immortal, and that man was only created for the present scene,—I think we should have reason to complain that love, infantine fondness, ever grew insipid and palled upon the sense. Let us eat, drink, and love, for

tomorrow we die, would be, in fact, the language of reason, the morality of life; and who but a fool would part with a reality for a fleeting shadow? But, if awed by observing the improbable<sup>2</sup> powers of the mind, we disdain to confine our wishes or thoughts to such a comparatively mean field of action, that only appears grand and important, as it is connected with a boundless prospect and sublime hopes, what necessity is there for falsehood in conduct, and why must the sacred majesty of truth be violated to detain a deceitful good that saps the very foundation of virtue? Why must the female mind be tainted by coquetish arts to gratify the sensualist, and prevent love from subsiding into friendship, or compassionate tenderness, when there are not qualities on which friendship can be built? Let the honest heart shew itself, and *reason* teach passion to submit to necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather embitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds.

I do not mean to allude to the romantic passion, which is the concomitant of genius.—Who can clip its wing? But that grand passion not proportioned to the puny enjoyments of life, is only true to the sentiment, and feeds on itself. The passions which have been celebrated for their durability have always been unfortunate. They have acquired strength by absence and constitutional melancholy.—The fancy<sup>3</sup> has hovered round a form of beauty dimly seen—but familiarity might have turned admiration into disgust; or, at least, into indifference, and allowed the imagination leisure to start fresh game. With perfect propriety, according to this view of things, does Rousseau make the mistress of his soul, Eloisa, love St. Preux, when life was fading before her;<sup>4</sup> but this is no proof of the immortality of the passion.

Of the same complexion is Dr. Gregory's advice respecting delicacy of sentiment, which he advises a woman not to acquire, if she have determined to marry.<sup>5</sup> This determination, however, perfectly consistent with his former advice, he calls *indelicate*, and earnestly persuades his daughters to conceal it, though it may

govern their conduct;—as if it were indelicate to have the common appetites of human nature.

Noble morality! and consistent with the cautious prudence of a little soul that cannot extend its views beyond the present minute division of existence. If all the faculties of woman's mind are only to be cultivated as they respect her dependence on man; if, when a husband be obtained, she have arrived at her goal, and meanly proud rests satisfied with such a paltry crown, let her grovel contentedly, scarcely raised by her employments above the animal kingdom; but, if, struggling for the prize of her high calling,<sup>6</sup> she look beyond the present scene, let her cultivate her understanding without stopping to consider what character the husband may have whom she is destined to marry. Let her only determine, without being too anxious about present happiness, to acquire the qualities that ennoble a rational being, and a rough inelegant husband may shock her taste without destroying her peace of mind. She will not model her soul to suit the frailties of her companion, but to bear with them: his character may be a trial, but not an impediment to virtue.

If Dr. Gregory confined his remark to romantic expectations of constant love and congenial feelings, he should have recollected that experience will banish what advice can never make us cease to wish for, when the imagination is kept alive at the expence of reason.

I own it frequently happens that women who have fostered a romantic unnatural delicacy of feeling, waste their<sup>7</sup> lives in *imagining* how happy they should have been with a husband who could love them with a fervid increasing affection every day, and all day. But they might as well pine married as single—and would not be a jot more unhappy with a bad husband than longing for a good one. That a proper education; or, to speak with more precision, a well stored mind, would enable a woman to support a single life with dignity, I grant; but that she should avoid cultivating her taste, lest her husband should occasionally shock it, is quitting a substance for a shadow. To say the truth, I do not know of what use is an improved taste, if the individual be not rendered more independent

of the casualties of life; if new sources of enjoyment, only dependent on the solitary operations of the mind, are not opened. People of taste, married or single, without distinction, will ever be disgusted by various things that touch not less observing minds. On this conclusion the argument must not be allowed to hinge; but in the whole sum of enjoyment is taste to be denominated a blessing?

The question is, whether it procures most pain or pleasure? The answer will decide the propriety of Dr. Gregory's advice, and shew how absurd and tyrannic it is thus to lay down a system of slavery; or to attempt to educate moral beings by any other rules than those deduced from pure reason, which apply to the whole species.

Gentleness of manners, forbearance and long-suffering, are such amiable Godlike qualities, that in sublime poetic strains the Deity has been invested with them; and, perhaps, no representation of his goodness so strongly fastens on the human affections as those that represent him abundant in mercy and willing to pardon.<sup>8</sup> Gentleness, considered in this point of view, bears on its front all the characteristics of grandeur, combined with the winning graces of condescension; but what a different aspect it assumes when it is the submissive demeanour of dependence, the support of weakness that loves, because it wants protection; and is forbearing, because it must silently endure injuries; smiling under the lash at which it dare not snarl. Abject as this picture appears, it is the portrait of an accomplished woman, according to the received opinion of female excellence separated by specious reasoners from human excellence. Or, they<sup>9</sup> kindly restore the rib, and make one moral being of a man and woman; not forgetting to give her all the 'submissive charms.'<sup>1</sup>

How women are to exist in that state where there is to be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, we are not told.<sup>2</sup> For though moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that *man* is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, they constantly concur in advising *woman* only to provide for the present. Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this ground, consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and, disregarding the arbitrary economy of nature, one writer has

declared that it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy.<sup>3</sup> She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused.

To recommend gentleness, indeed, on a broad basis is strictly philosophical. A frail being should labour to be gentle. But when forbearance confounds right and wrong, it ceases to be a virtue; and, however convenient it may be found in a companion—that companion will ever be considered as an inferior, and only inspire a vapid tenderness, which easily degenerates into contempt. Still, if advice could really make a being gentle, whose natural disposition admitted not of such a fine polish, something towards the advancement of order would be attained; but if, as might quickly be demonstrated, only affectation be produced by this indiscriminate counsel, which throws a stumbling-block in the way of gradual improvement, and true melioration of temper, the sex is not much benefited by sacrificing solid virtues to the attainment of superficial graces, though for a few years they may procure the individuals regal sway.

As a philosopher, I read with indignation the plausible epithets which men use to soften their insults; and, as a moralist, I ask what is meant by such heterogeneous associations, as fair defects, amiable weaknesses, &c.<sup>4</sup> If there be but one criterion of morals, but one archetype for man, women appear to be suspended by destiny, according to the vulgar tale of Mahomet's coffin;<sup>5</sup> they have neither the unerring instinct of brutes, nor are allowed to fix the eye of reason on a perfect model. They were made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine.

But to view the subject in another point of view. Do passive indolent women make the best wives? Confining our discussion to the present moment of existence, let us see how such weak creatures perform their part? Do the women who, by the attainment of a few superficial accomplishments, have strengthened the prevailing prejudice, merely contribute to the happiness of their husbands? Do they display their charms merely to amuse them? And

have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or educate children? So far from it, that, after surveying the history of woman, I cannot help, agreeing with the severest satirist, considering the sex as the weakest as well as the most oppressed half of the species. What does history disclose but marks of inferiority, and how few women have emancipated themselves from the galling yoke of sovereign man?—So few, that the exceptions remind me of an ingenious conjecture respecting Newton: that he was probably a being of a superior order, accidentally caged in a human body.<sup>6</sup> Following the same train of thinking, I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in eccentric directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex, were *male* spirits, confined by mistake in female frames. But if it be not philosophical to think of sex when the soul is mentioned, the inferiority must depend on the organs; or the heavenly fire, which is to ferment the clay, is not given in equal portions.

But avoiding, as I have hitherto done, any direct comparison of the two sexes collectively, or frankly acknowledging the inferiority of woman, according to the present appearance of things, I shall only insist that men have increased that inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures. Let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale. Yet let it be remembered, that for a small number of distinguished women I do not ask a place.

It is difficult for us purblind mortals to say to what height human discoveries and improvements may arrive when the gloom of despotism subsides, which makes us stumble at every step; but, when morality shall be settled on a more solid basis, then, without being gifted with a prophetic spirit, I will venture to predict that woman will be either the friend or slave of man. We shall not, as at present, doubt whether she is a moral agent, or the link which unites man with brutes. But, should it then appear, that like the brutes they were principally created for the use of man, he will let



them patiently bite the bridle, and not mock them with empty praise; or, should their rationality be proved, he will not impede their improvement merely to gratify his sensual appetites. He will not, with all the graces of rhetoric, advise them to submit implicitly their understanding to the guidance of man. He will not, when he treats of the education of women, assert that they ought never to have the free use of reason, nor would he recommend cunning and dissimulation to beings who are acquiring, in like manner as himself, the virtues of humanity.

Surely there can be but one rule of right, if morality has an eternal foundation, and whoever sacrifices virtue, strictly so called, to present convenience, or whose *duty* it is to act in such a manner, lives only for the passing day, and cannot be an accountable creature.

The poet then should have dropped his sneer when he says,

If weak women go astray,  
The stars are more in fault than they.<sup>7</sup>

For that they are bound by the adamant chain of destiny is most certain, if it be proved that they are never to exercise their own reason, never to be independent, never to rise above opinion, or to feel the dignity of a rational will that only bows to God, and often forgets that the universe contains any being but itself and the model of perfection to which its ardent gaze is turned, to adore attributes that, softened into virtues, may be imitated in kind, though the degree overwhelms the enraptured mind.

If I say, for I would not impress by declamation when Reason offers her sober light, if they be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of principle, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God. Teach them, in common with man, to



submit to necessity, instead of giving, to render them more pleasing, a sex to morals.

Further, should experience prove that they cannot attain the same degree of strength of mind, perseverance, and fortitude, let their virtues be the same in kind, though they may vainly struggle for the same degree; and the superiority of man will be equally clear, if not clearer; and truth, as it is a simple principle, which admits of no modification, would be common to both. Nay, the order of society as it is at present regulated would not be inverted, for woman would then only have the rank that reason assigned her, and arts could not be practised to bring the balance even, much less to turn it.

These may be termed Utopian dreams.—Thanks to that Being who impressed them on my soul, and gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own reason, till, becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex.

I love man as my fellow; but his scepter, real, or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man. In fact, the conduct of an accountable being must be regulated by the operations of its own reason; or on what foundation rests the throne of God?

It appears to me necessary to dwell on these obvious truths, because females have been insulated, as it were; and, while they have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked with artificial graces that enable them to exercise a short-lived tyranny. Love, in their bosoms, taking place of every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be fair, to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire, like the servility in absolute monarchies, destroys all strength of character. Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics,<sup>8</sup> and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature.

As to the argument respecting the subjection in which the sex has ever been held, it retorts on man. The many have always been enthralled by the few; and monsters, who scarcely have shewn any discernment of human excellence, have tyrannized over thousands of their fellow-creatures. Why have men of superiour endowments submitted to such degradation? For, is it not universally acknowledged that kings, viewed collectively, have ever been inferior, in abilities and virtue, to the same number of men taken from the common mass of mankind—yet, have they not, and are they not still treated with a degree of reverence that is an insult to reason? China is not the only country where a living man has been made a God.<sup>9</sup> *Men* have submitted to superior strength to enjoy with impunity the pleasure of the moment—*women* have only done the same, and therefore till it is proved that the courtier, who servilely resigns the birthright of a man, is not a moral agent, it cannot be demonstrated that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated.

Brutal force has hitherto governed the world, and that the science of politics is in its infancy, is evident from philosophers scrupling to give the knowledge most useful to man that determinate distinction.

I shall not pursue this argument any further than to establish an obvious inference, that as sound politics diffuse liberty, mankind, including woman, will become more wise and virtuous.

## Endnotes

- Note 8: Milton asserts the authority of man over woman on the grounds that “For contemplation he and valor formed, / For softness she and sweet attractive grace; / He for God only, she for God in him” (*Paradise Lost* 4.298ff.).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Francis Bacon, Essay XVI, “Of Atheism.”[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Throughout his writings Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) argued against the notion that civilization and rationality

brought moral perfection, proposing that virtuous societies were instead the primitive ones that remained closest to nature.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Both Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. In the fallen state both men and women need to work at virtue, but according to Wollstonecraft, women have been denied the education, and thus the means, to attain it.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: *Paradise Lost* 4.634–38. The italics are Wollstonecraft's.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: *Paradise Lost* 8.381–92. The italics are Wollstonecraft's.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Temperament, character.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Education at home.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: John Gregory (1724–1773), Scottish physician, philosopher, and professor at the University of Edinburgh. In her edited anthology *The Female Reader* (1789) Wollstonecraft had quoted extensively from Gregory's widely read advice book, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774). Here she returns to that work in a more critical spirit.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Matthew 15:14: "And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." "One . . . from heaven": Jesus.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Why should women be censured with petulant acrimony, because they seem to have a passion for a scarlet coat? Has not education placed them more on a level with soldiers than any other class of men? [*Wollstonecraft's note*].[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Women.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: As a zero added to a number multiplies its value by a factor of ten, in a hierarchical society women magnify the status of the men with whom they are allied.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: "*Sophie ou la Femme*" is the title of book 5 of *Émile*, Rousseau's blend of educational treatise and novel. Having tracked the development of Émile, his imaginary pupil, up to

age twenty, Rousseau invents the character of Sophie (Sophia in the 1762 English translation) to supply his hero with a wife and to address, belatedly, the topic of female education.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: A common spelling for “waive” in the 18th century.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5:  
Similar feelings has Milton’s pleasing picture of paradisiacal happiness ever raised in my mind; yet, instead of envying the lovely pair, I have, with conscious dignity, or Satanic pride, turned to hell for sublimer objects. In the same style, when viewing some noble monument of human art, I have traced the emanation of the Deity in the order I admired, till, descending from that giddy height, I have caught myself contemplating the grandest of all human sights;—for fancy quickly placed, in some solitary recess, an outcast of fortune, rising superior to passion and discontent [*Wollstonecraft’s note*]. Wollstonecraft is referring to the portrait of Adam and Eve.  
[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: *Émile*: “The first and most important qualification in a woman is good nature or sweetness of temper: formed to obey a being so imperfect as man, often full of vices, and always full of faults, she ought to learn betimes even to suffer injustice, and to bear the insults of a husband without complaint: it is not for his sake, but her own, that she should be of a mild disposition.”[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: See Genesis 2:21–23 for one account of the creation of woman. Moses was thought to be the author of the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Alexander Pope, “Of the Characters of Women,” Epistle 2, lines 51–52, of his *Moral Essays* (1735).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, to outdo the idealistic but ineffectual hero of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605) in trying to accomplish the impossible. [Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: "The love of dress is natural to you, and therefore it is proper and reasonable." John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, 2nd ed. (London, 1775).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, "natural."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: For this and the previous sentence see Gregory: "I would have you to dance with spirit; but never allow yourselves to be so far transported with mirth, as to forget the delicacy of your sex.—Many a girl dancing in the gaiety and innocence of her heart, is thought to discover a spirit she little dreams of."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Matthew 12:34.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, Jesus, who describes himself in comparable terms in Luke 11:31. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In Luke 11:39–44 and Matthew 23:25–28, Jesus speaks of purifying the inner self and denounces the Pharisees' self-righteous observance of the letter of the law.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Gregory: "If you love him, let me advise you never to discover to him the full extent of your love, no, not although you marry him."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A medicine reputed to cure all diseases. "Philosopher's stone": sought by alchemists because it was supposed to have the power to transmute base metals into gold.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: La Rochefoucauld (1613–1680, French noble), *Les Maximes*, No. 473.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Wollstonecraft's point is that a woman who is not preoccupied with her husband (and his attentions to her) has more time and energy for her children.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The first edition reads "improvable" here, which makes more sense in context.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Imagination.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In Rousseau's *Julie; ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), the heroine, Julie, reveals her long-held passionate love for St. Preux as she is dying, even though she has been a faithful wife to Wolmar since her marriage.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Gregory: "But if you find that marriage is absolutely essential to your happiness . . . shun . . . reading and conversation that warms the imagination, which engages and softens the heart, and raises the taste above the level of common life . . . [otherwise] you may be tired with insipidity and dullness; shocked with indelicacy, or mortified by indifference."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An echo of Philippians 3:14, where Saint Paul writes, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: For example, the herd of Novelists [*Wollstonecraft's note*].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Isaiah 55:7: "And he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Vide Rousseau, and Swedenborg [*Wollstonecraft's note*]. The Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) believed that in the afterlife each married couple would form a single angel, with the wife contributing her capacity for love and the husband his wisdom.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *Paradise Lost* 4.497–99: "he in delight / Both of her Beauty and submissive charms / Smil'd with superior love."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An echo of Jesus's account of the resurrection in Matthew 22:30.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Perhaps a recollection of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). In attempting to distinguish the aesthetic category of "the beautiful" from the aesthetic category of "the sublime," Burke resorts frequently to analogy and so devotes many pages to outlining his notions of the distinctions that separate femininity from masculinity.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: *Paradise Lost* 10.891–92: "This fair defect / Of nature"; and Pope, "Of the Characters of Women," line 44: "Fine by defect, and delicately weak."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Wollstonecraft refers to a discredited European legend maintaining that at Mohammed's tomb in Medina giant magnets

- were used to suspend his coffin in midair.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Possibly a reference to Pope's 1733–34 *Essay on Man*, Epistle 2, lines 31–34: "Superior beings, when of late they saw / A mortal Man unfold all Nature's law, / Admir'd such wisdom in an earthly shape, / And shew'd a NEWTON as we shew an Ape." Isaac Newton (1643–1727) was revered across Europe for his foundational work of physics, the *Principia* (1687), in which he formulated the laws of gravitation and motion.[Return to reference 6](#)
  - Note 7: Matthew Prior, "Hans Carvel" (1700), lines 11–12.[Return to reference 7](#)
  - Note 8: Hothouse plants, which do not thrive in the English climate. Wollstonecraft's phrasing also recalls the language of the 1772 case of the enslaved Black man James Somerset, in which the judge, Lord Mansfield, issued a ruling effectively prohibiting slavery within England. Somerset's lawyer had successfully argued that no person could be held as a slave on English soil, whose "air is . . . too pure for slaves to breathe in."[Return to reference 8](#)
  - Note 9: The emperors of China were known as the "sons of heaven."[Return to reference 9](#)



**From *Chapter 4. Observations on the State of Degradation to Which Woman Is Reduced by Various Causes.***

\* \* \*

In the middle rank of life, to continue the comparison,<sup>1</sup> men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the excursive flights of ambition, that engross their attention; no, their thoughts are not employed in rearing such noble structures. To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted. A man when he enters any profession has his eye steadily fixed on some future advantage (and the mind gains great strength by having all its efforts directed to one point), and, full of his business, pleasure is considered as mere relaxation; whilst women seek for pleasure as the main purpose of existence. In fact, from the education, which they receive from society, the love of pleasure may be said to govern them all; but does this prove that there is a sex in souls? It would be just as rational to declare that the courtiers in France, when a destructive system of despotism had formed their character, were not men, because liberty, virtue, and humanity, were sacrificed to pleasure and vanity.—Fatal passions, which have ever domineered over the *whole* race!

The same love of pleasure, fostered by the whole tendency of their education, gives a trifling turn to the conduct of women in most circumstances: for instance, they are ever anxious about secondary things; and on the watch for adventures, instead of being occupied by duties.

A man, when he undertakes a journey, has, in general, the end in view; a woman thinks more of the incidental occurrences, the



strange things that may possibly occur on the road; the impression that she may make on her fellow-travellers; and, above all, she is anxiously intent on the care of the finery that she carries with her, which is more than ever a part of herself, when going to figure on a new scene; when, to use an apt French turn of expression, she is going to produce a sensation.—Can dignity of mind exist with such trivial cares?

In short, women, in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit. It is not necessary for me always to premise, that I speak of the condition of the whole sex, leaving exceptions out of the question. Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. Civilized women are, therefore, so weakened by false refinement, that, respecting morals, their condition is much below what it would be were they left in a state nearer to nature. Ever restless and anxious, their over exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome, to use a soft phrase, to others. All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering—not the wavering produced by deliberation or progressive views, but by contradictory emotions. By fits and starts they are warm in many pursuits; yet this warmth, never concentrated into perseverance, soon exhausts itself; exhaled by its own heat, or meeting with some other fleeting passion, to which reason has never given any specific gravity, neutrality ensues. Miserable, indeed, must be that being whose cultivation of mind has only tended to inflame its passions! A distinction should be made between inflaming and strengthening them. The passions thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue?—Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly!

This observation should not be confined to the *fair* sex; however, at present, I only mean to apply it to them.

Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly during the time they are acquiring accomplishments, the only improvement they are excited, by their station in society, to acquire. This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others, and content with its own station: for the exercise of the understanding, as life advances, is the only method pointed out by nature to calm the passions.

Satiety has a very different effect, and I have often been forcibly struck by an emphatical description of damnation:—when the spirit is represented as continually hovering with abortive eagerness round the defied body, unable to enjoy any thing without the organs of sense. Yet, to their senses, are women made slaves, because it is by their sensibility that they obtain present power.

And will moralists pretend to assert, that this is the condition in which one half of the human race should be encouraged to remain with listless inactivity and stupid acquiescence? Kind instructors! what were we created for? To remain, it may be said, innocent; they mean in a state of childhood.—We might as well never have been born, unless it were necessary that we should be created to enable man to acquire the noble privilege of reason, the power of discerning good from evil, whilst we lie down in the dust from whence we were taken, never to rise again.—

It would be an endless task to trace the variety of meannesses, cares, and sorrows, into which women are plunged by the prevailing opinion, that they were created rather to feel than reason, and that all the power they obtain, must be obtained by their charms and weakness:

Fine by defect, and amiably weak!<sup>2</sup>

And, made by this amiable weakness entirely dependent, excepting what they gain by illicit sway, on man, not only for protection, but

advice, is it surprising that, neglecting the duties that reason alone points out, and shrinking from trials calculated to strengthen their minds, they only exert themselves to give their defects a graceful covering, which may serve to heighten their charms in the eye of the voluptuary, though it sink them below the scale of moral excellence?

Fragile in every sense of the word, they are obliged to look up to man for every comfort. In the most trifling dangers they cling to their support, with parasitical tenacity, piteously demanding succour; and their *natural* protector extends his arm, or lifts up his voice, to guard the lovely trembler—from what? Perhaps the frown of an old cow, or the jump of a mouse; a rat, would be a serious danger. In the name of reason, and even common sense, what can save such beings from contempt; even though they be soft and fair?

These fears, when not affected, may produce some pretty attitudes; but they shew a degree of imbecility which degrades a rational creature in a way women are not aware of—for love and esteem are very distinct things.

I am fully persuaded that we should hear of none of these infantine airs, if girls were allowed to take sufficient exercise, and not confined in close rooms till their muscles are relaxed, and their powers of digestion destroyed. To carry the remark still further, if fear in girls, instead of being cherished, perhaps, created, were treated in the same manner as cowardice in boys, we should quickly see women with more dignified aspects. It is true, they could not then with equal propriety be termed the sweet flowers that smile in the walk of man; but they would be more respectable members of society, and discharge the important duties of life by the light of their own reason. 'Educate women like men,' says Rousseau, 'and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.'<sup>3</sup> This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves.

In the same strain have I heard men argue against instructing the poor; for many are the forms that aristocracy assumes. 'Teach them to read and write,' say they, 'and you take them out of the station assigned them by nature.' An eloquent Frenchman has

answered them, I will borrow his sentiments. But they know not, when they make man a brute, that they may expect every instant to see him transformed into a ferocious beast.<sup>4</sup> Without knowledge there can be no morality!

Ignorance is a frail base for virtue! Yet, that it is the condition for which woman was organized, has been insisted upon by the writers who have most vehemently argued in, favour of the superiority of man; a superiority not in degree, but essence; though, to soften the argument, they have laboured to prove, with chivalrous generosity, that the sexes ought not to be compared; man was made to reason, woman to feel: and that together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into one character.

And what is sensibility? 'Quickness of sensation; quickness of perception; delicacy.' Thus is it defined by Dr. Johnson;<sup>5</sup> and the definition gives me no other idea than of the most exquisitely polished instinct. I discern not a trace of the image of God in either sensation or matter. Refined seventy times seven,<sup>6</sup> they are still material; intellect dwells not there; nor will fire ever make lead gold!

I come round to my old argument; if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as the employment of life, an understanding to improve. And when, to render the present state more complete, though every thing proves it to be but a fraction of a mighty sum, she is incited by present gratification to forget her grand destination, nature is counteracted, or she was born only to procreate and rot. Or, granting brutes, of every description, a soul, though not a reasonable one, the exercise of instinct and sensibility may be the step, which they are to take, in this life, towards the attainment of reason in the next; so that through all eternity they will lag behind man, who, why we cannot tell, had the power given him of attaining reason in his first mode of existence.

When I treat of the peculiar duties of women, as I should treat of the peculiar duties of a citizen or father, it will be found that I do not mean to insinuate that they should be taken out of their families, speaking of the majority. 'He that hath wife and children,' says Lord

Bacon, 'hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief. Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men.'<sup>7</sup> I say the same of women. But, the welfare of society is not built on extraordinary exertions; and were it more reasonably organized, there would be still less need of great abilities, or heroic virtues.

In the regulation of a family, in the education of children, understanding, in an unsophisticated sense, is particularly required: strength both of body and mind; yet the men who, by their writings, have most earnestly laboured to domesticate women, have endeavoured, by arguments dictated by a gross appetite, which satiety had rendered fastidious, to weaken their bodies and cramp their minds. But, if even by these sinister methods they really *persuaded* women, by working on their feelings, to stay at home, and fulfil the duties of a mother and mistress of a family, I should cautiously oppose opinions that led women to right conduct, by prevailing on them to make the discharge of such important duties the main business of life, though reason were insulted. Yet, and I appeal to experience, if by neglecting the understanding they be as much, nay, more detached from these domestic employments, than they could be by the most serious intellectual pursuit, though it may be observed, that the mass of mankind will never vigorously pursue an intellectual object,<sup>8</sup> I may be allowed to infer that reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and I must again repeat, that sensibility is not reason.

The comparison with the rich still occurs to me; for, when men neglect the duties of humanity, women will follow their example; a common stream hurries them both along with thoughtless celerity. Riches and honours prevent a man from enlarging his understanding, and enervate all his powers by reversing the order of nature, which has ever made true pleasure the reward of labour. Pleasure—enervating pleasure is, likewise, within women's reach without earning it. But, till hereditary possessions are spread abroad, how can we expect men to be proud of virtue? And, till they are,

women will govern them by the most direct means, neglecting their dull domestic duties to catch the pleasure that sits lightly on the wing of time.

'The power of the woman,' says some author, 'is her sensibility';<sup>9</sup> and men, not aware of the consequence, do all they can to make this power swallow up every other. Those who constantly employ their sensibility will have most: for example; poets, painters, and composers.<sup>1</sup> Yet, when the sensibility is thus increased at the expence of reason, and even the imagination, why do philosophical men complain of their fickleness? The sexual attention of man particularly acts on female sensibility, and this sympathy has been exercised from their youth up. A husband cannot long pay those attentions with the passion necessary to excite lively emotions, and the heart, accustomed to lively emotions, turns to a new lover, or pines in secret, the prey of virtue or prudence. I mean when the heart has really been rendered susceptible, and the taste formed; for I am apt to conclude, from what I have seen in fashionable life, that vanity is oftener fostered than sensibility by the mode of education, and the intercourse between the sexes, which I have reprobated; and that coquetry more frequently proceeds from vanity than from that inconstancy, which overstrained sensibility naturally produces.

Another argument that has had great weight with me, must, I think, have some force with every considerate benevolent heart. Girls who have been thus weakly educated, are often cruelly left by their parents without any provision; and, of course, are dependent on, not only the reason, but the bounty of their brothers. These brothers are, to view the fairest side of the question, good sort of men, and give as a favour, what children of the same parents had an equal right to. In this equivocal humiliating situation, a docile female may remain some time, with a tolerable degree of comfort. But, when the brother marries, a probable circumstance, from being considered as the mistress of the family, she is viewed with averted looks as an intruder, an unnecessary burden on the benevolence of the master of the house, and his new partner.

Who can recount the misery, which many unfortunate beings, whose minds and bodies are equally weak, suffer in such situations—unable to work, and ashamed to beg? The wife, a cold-hearted, narrow-minded, woman, and this is not an unfair supposition; for the present mode of education does not tend to enlarge the heart any more than the understanding, is jealous of the little kindness which her husband shews to his relations; and her sensibility not rising to humanity, she is displeased at seeing the property of *her* children lavished on an helpless sister.

These are matters of fact, which have come under my eye again and again. The consequence is obvious, the wife has recourse to cunning to undermine the habitual affection, which she is afraid openly to oppose; and neither tears nor caresses are spared till the spy is worked out of her home, and thrown on the world, unprepared for its difficulties; or sent, as a great effort of generosity, or from some regard to propriety, with a small stipend, and an uncultivated mind, into joyless solitude.

These two women may be much upon a par, with respect to reason and humanity; and changing situations, might have acted just the same selfish part; but had they been differently educated, the case would also have been very different. The wife would not have had that sensibility, of which self is the centre, and reason might have taught her not to expect, and not even to be flattered by, the affection of her husband, if it led him to violate prior duties. She would wish not to love him merely because he loved her, but on account of his virtues; and the sister might have been able to struggle for herself instead of eating the bitter bread of dependence.

I am, indeed, persuaded that the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation; and by, which may not appear so clear, strengthening the organs; I am not now talking of momentary flashes of sensibility, but of affections. And, perhaps, in the education of both sexes, the most difficult task is so to adjust instruction as not to narrow the understanding, whilst the heart is warmed by the generous juices of spring, just raised by the electric

fermentation of the season; nor to dry up the feelings by employing the mind in investigations remote from life.

With respect to women, when they receive a careful education, they are either made fine ladies, brimful of sensibility, and teeming with capricious fancies; or mere notable women.<sup>2</sup> The latter are often friendly, honest creatures, and have a shrewd kind of good sense joined with worldly prudence, that often render them more useful members of society than the fine sentimental lady, though they possess neither greatness of mind nor taste. The intellectual world is shut against them; take them out of their family or neighbourhood, and they stand still; the mind finding no employment, for literature affords a fund of amusement which they have never sought to relish, but frequently to despise. The sentiments and taste of more cultivated minds appear ridiculous, even in those whom chance and family connections have led them to love; but in mere acquaintance they think it all affectation.

A man of sense can only love such a woman on account of her sex, and respect her, because she is a trusty servant. He lets her, to preserve his own peace, scold the servants, and go to church in clothes made of the very best materials. A man of her own size of understanding would, probably, not agree so well with her; for he might wish to encroach on her prerogative, and manage some domestic concerns himself. Yet women, whose minds are not enlarged by cultivation, or the natural selfishness of sensibility expanded by reflection, are very unfit to manage a family; for, by an undue stretch of power, they are always tyrannizing to support a superiority that only rests on the arbitrary distinction of fortune. The evil is sometimes more serious, and domestics are deprived of innocent indulgences, and made to work beyond their strength, in order to enable the notable woman to keep a better table, and outshine her neighbours in finery and parade. If she attend to her children, it is, in general, to dress them in a costly manner—and, whether this attention arise from vanity or fondness, it is equally pernicious.



Besides, how many women of this description pass their days; or, at least, their evenings, discontentedly. Their husbands acknowledge that they are good managers, and chaste wives; but leave home to seek for more agreeable, may I be allowed to use a significant French word, *piquant*<sup>3</sup> society; and the patient drudge, who fulfils her task, like a blind horse in a mill, is defrauded of her just reward; for the wages due to her are the caresses of her husband; and women who have so few resources in themselves, do not very patiently bear this privation of a natural right.

A fine lady, on the contrary, has been taught to look down with contempt on the vulgar employments of life; though she has only been incited to acquire accomplishments that rise a degree above sense; for even corporeal accomplishments cannot be acquired with any degree of precision unless the understanding has been strengthened by exercise. Without a foundation of principles taste is superficial, grace must arise from something deeper than imitation. The imagination, however, is heated, and the feelings rendered fastidious, if not sophisticated; or, a counterpoise of judgment is not acquired, when the heart still remains artless, though it becomes too tender.

These women are often amiable; and their hearts are really more sensible to general benevolence, more alive to the sentiments that civilize life, than the square-elbowed family drudge; but, wanting a due proportion of reflection and self-government, they only inspire love; and are the mistresses of their husbands, whilst they have any hold on their affections; and the platonic friends of his male acquaintance. These are the fair defects in nature; the women who appear to be created not to enjoy the fellowship of man, but to save him from sinking into absolute brutality, by rubbing off the rough angles of his character; and by playful dalliance to give some dignity to the appetite that draws him to them.—Gracious Creator of the whole human race! hast thou created such a being as woman, who can trace thy wisdom in thy works, and feel that thou alone art by thy nature exalted above her,—for no better purpose?—Can she believe that she was only made to submit to man, her equal, a

being, who, like her, was sent into the world to acquire virtue?—Can she consent to be occupied merely to please him; merely to adorn the earth, when her soul is capable of rising to thee?—And can she rest supinely dependent on man for reason, when she ought to mount with him the arduous steep of knowledge?—

Yet, if love be the supreme good, let women be only educated to inspire it, and let every charm be polished to intoxicate the senses; but, if they be moral beings, let them have a chance to become intelligent; and let love to man be only a part of that glowing flame of universal love, which, after encircling humanity, mounts in grateful incense to God.

\* \* \*

1792

## Endnotes

- Note 1: That is, her comparison between the social expectations that shape men and those that shape women and lead them to “degradation.”[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A misquotation of Pope, “Of the Characters of Women,” line 44: “Fine by defect, and delicately weak.”[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The passage continues: “and when once they become like ourselves, we shall then be truly their masters” (*Émile*).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Wollstonecraft might be remembering a remark made in 1790 by the statesman Mirabeau, responding to the aggressive tone of the debates in revolutionary France’s new National Assembly and reflecting, more generally, on the power the common people had come to exercise in the nation’s political arguments: “you have loosed the bull: do you expect he will not use his horns?”[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Wollstonecraft cites the emended definition Johnson included in the fourth (1773) edition of his *Dictionary*.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Matthew 18:22: "Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Francis Bacon, Essay 8, "Of Marriage and the Single Life."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The mass of mankind are rather the slaves of their appetites than of their passions [ *Wollstonecraft's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Possibly a recollection of *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, in which Gregory, discussing women's blushing, asserts "That extreme sensibility which it indicates, may be a weakness and incumbrance in our sex . . . but in yours it is peculiarly engaging."[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Men of these descriptions pour it into their compositions, to amalgamate the gross materials; and, moulding them with passion, give to the inert body a soul; but, in woman's imagination, love alone concentrates these ethereal beams [ *Wollstonecraft's note*].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, industrious and energetic housewives.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Stimulating.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark

Writing to a friend in March 1797, the poet Robert Southey declared himself haunted by a book of travels that the firm of Joseph Johnson had published at the start of the preceding year: Mary Wollstonecraft, Southey enthused, “has made me in love with a cold climate, and frost and snow, with a northern moonlight.” Wollstonecraft had set out on her arduous and sometimes dangerous five-month journey through the Scandinavian countries in June 1795, taking with her Fanny, her year-old infant, and Marguerite, a French maid who had earlier accompanied her from Paris to London. Fanny’s father, Gilbert Imlay—author, inaugurator of sometimes shady commercial deals, and inveterate philanderer—had devised this scheme of sending Wollstonecraft as his business agent to the northern countries, thus leaving himself free to pursue an affair with another woman. Upon returning to London in September 1795, Wollstonecraft prepared for publication the letters that she had written to Imlay during the trip. Contemporary readers were left to speculate about the identity of the *you* to whom the letters were addressed and to ponder the suggestion that the letters’ unhappy author had once been romantically involved with this unnamed correspondent. For many this tantalizingly sketchy love story gave the *Letters* their fascination. Writing in his *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft, William Godwin declared, “If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me the book.”

By the late eighteenth century, travel writing had begun to develop into a philosophical genre—a forum for comparative inquiries into the effects various sorts of political institutions and legal systems had on people’s everyday lives and a forum in which commentators assessed the costs, as well as the benefits, of social and economic progress. Wollstonecraft had reviewed travelogues for Johnson’s *Analytical Review*, and she contributed to this development in her turn with these discussions of Europe’s northern fringe, a remote, unmodernized region that until then had rarely figured on travelers’ itineraries. In the letters she thus remarks

insightfully on the relations between rich and poor in the communities she visits, on the people's responses to the political tumults of the era, and, especially, on the situation of women and the petty despotisms of family life. Yet she also responds ardently to the sublime natural scenery of Scandinavia, and moves easily from those aesthetic contemplations to meditations on death and the possibility of an afterlife—reveries she intersperses with her sharply realistic observations of the world around her.

# ***From Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark***

## ***Advertisement***

The writing travels, or memoirs, has ever been a pleasant employment; for vanity or sensibility always renders it interesting. In writing these desultory letters, I found I could not avoid being continually the first person—"the little hero of each tale."<sup>1</sup> I tried to correct this fault, if it be one, for they were designed for publication; but in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letter, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained, as I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh.

A person has a right, I have sometimes thought, when amused by a witty or interesting egotist, to talk of himself when he can win on our attention by acquiring our affection. Whether I deserve to rank amongst this privileged number, my readers alone can judge—and I give them leave to shut the book, if they do not wish to become better acquainted with me.

My plan was simply to endeavor to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through, as far as I could obtain information during so short a residence; avoiding those details which, without being very useful to travelers who follow the same route, appear very insipid to those who only accompany you in their chair.

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1: Edward Young, *Love of Fame, the Universal Passion* (1725), line 116.[Return to reference 1](#)

## ***Letter 1***

Eleven days of weariness on board a vessel not intended for the accommodation of passengers have so exhausted my spirits, to say nothing of the other causes, with which you are already sufficiently acquainted, that it is with some difficulty I adhere to my determination of giving you my observations, as I travel through new scenes, whilst warmed with the impression they have made on me.

The captain, as I mentioned to you, promised to put me on shore at Arendall, or Gothenburg, in his way to Elsineur;<sup>2</sup> but contrary winds obliged us to pass both places during the night. In the morning, however, after we had lost sight of the entrance of the latter bay, the vessel was becalmed; and the captain, to oblige me, hanging out a signal for a pilot, bore down towards the shore.

My attention was particularly directed to the lighthouse; and you can scarcely imagine with what anxiety I watched two long hours for a boat to emancipate me—still no one appeared. Every cloud that flitted on the horizon was hailed as a liberator, till approaching nearer, like most of the prospects sketched by hope, it dissolved under the eye into disappointment.

Weary of expectation, I then began to converse with the captain on the subject; and, from the tenor of the information my questions drew forth, I soon concluded, that, if I waited for a boat, I had little chance of getting on shore at this place. Despotism, as is usually the case, I found had here cramped the industry of man. The pilots being paid by the king, and scantily, they will not run into any danger, or even quit their hovels, if they can possibly avoid it, only to fulfil what is termed their duty. How different is it on the English coast, where, in the most stormy weather, boats immediately hail you, brought out by the expectation of extraordinary profit.

Disliking to sail for Elsineur, and still more to lie at anchor, or cruise about the coast for several days, I exerted all my rhetoric to prevail on the captain to let me have the ship's boat; and though I



added the most forcible of arguments, I for a long time addressed him in vain.

It is a kind of rule at sea, not to send out a boat. The captain was a good-natured man; but men with common minds seldom break through general rules. Prudence is ever the resort of weakness; and they rarely go as far as they may in any undertaking, who are determined not to go beyond it on any account. If, however, I had some trouble with the captain, I did not lose much time with the sailors; for they, all alacrity, hoisted out the boat, the moment I obtained permission, and promised to row me to the lighthouse.

I did not once allow myself to doubt of obtaining a conveyance from thence round the rocks—and then away for Gothenburg—confinement is so unpleasant.

The day was fine; and I enjoyed the water till, approaching the little island, poor Marguerite, whose timidity always acts as a feeler before her adventuring spirit, began to wonder at our not seeing any inhabitants. I did not listen to her. But when, on landing, the same silence prevailed, I caught the alarm, which was not lessened by the sight of two old men, whom we forced out of their wretched hut. Scarcely human in their appearance, we with difficulty obtained an intelligible reply to our questions—the result of which was, that they had no boat, and were not allowed to quit their post, on any pretense. But, they informed us, that there was at the other side, eight or ten miles over, a pilot's dwelling; two guineas<sup>3</sup> tempted the sailors to risk the captain's displeasure, and once more embark to row me over.

The weather was pleasant, and the appearance of the shore so grand, that I should have enjoyed the two hours it took to reach it, but for the fatigue which was too visible in the countenances of the sailors who, instead of uttering a complaint, were, with the thoughtless hilarity peculiar to them, joking about the possibility of the captain's taking advantage of a slight westerly breeze, which was springing up, to sail without them. Yet, in spite of their good humor, I could not help growing uneasy when the shore, receding, as it were, as we advanced, seemed to promise no end to their toil. This

anxiety increased when, turning into the most picturesque bay I ever saw, my eyes sought in vain for the vestige of a human habitation. Before I could determine what step to take in such a dilemma, for I could not bear to think of returning to the ship, the sight of a barge relieved me, and we hastened towards it for information. We were immediately directed to pass some jutting rocks when we should see a pilot's hut.

There was a solemn silence in this scene, which made itself be felt. The sunbeams that played on the ocean, scarcely ruffled by the lightest breeze, contrasted with the huge, dark rocks, that looked like the rude materials of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space, forcibly struck me; but I should not have been sorry if the cottage had not appeared equally tranquil. Approaching a retreat where strangers, especially women, so seldom appeared, I wondered that curiosity did not bring the beings who inhabited it to the windows or door. I did not immediately recollect that men who remain so near the brute creation, as only to exert themselves to find the food necessary to sustain life, have little or no imagination to call forth the curiosity necessary to fructify the faint glimmerings of mind which entitles them to rank as lords of the creation.—Had they either, they could not contentedly remain rooted in the clods they so indolently cultivate.

Whilst the sailors went to seek for the sluggish inhabitants, these conclusions occurred to me; and, recollecting the extreme fondness which the Parisians ever testify for novelty, their very curiosity appeared to me a proof of the progress they had made in refinement. Yes; in the art of living—in the art of escaping from the cares which embarrass the first steps towards the attainment of the pleasures of social life.

The pilots informed the sailors that they were under the direction of a lieutenant retired from the service, who spoke English; adding, that they could do nothing without his orders; and even the offer of money could hardly conquer their laziness, and prevail on them to accompany us to his dwelling. They would not go with me alone which I wanted them to have done, because I wished to dismiss the

sailors as soon as possible. Once more we rowed off, they following tardily, till, turning round another bold protuberance of the rocks, we saw a boat making towards us, and soon learnt that it was the lieutenant himself, coming with some earnestness to see who we were.

To save the sailors any further toil, I had my baggage instantly removed into his boat; for, as he could speak English, a previous parley was not necessary; though Marguerite's respect for me could hardly keep her from expressing the fear, strongly marked on her countenance, which my putting ourselves into the power of a strange man excited. He pointed out his cottage; and, drawing near to it, I was not sorry to see a female figure, though I had not, like Marguerite, been thinking of robberies, murders, or the other evil<sup>4</sup> which instantly, as the sailors would have said, runs foul of a woman's imagination.

On entering, I was still better pleased to find a clean house, with some degree of rural elegance. The beds were of muslin, coarse it is true, but dazzlingly white; and the floor was strewn over with little sprigs of juniper (the custom, as I afterwards found, of the country), which formed a contrast with the curtains and produced an agreeable sensation of freshness, to soften the ardor of noon. Still nothing was so pleasing as the alacrity of hospitality—all that the house afforded was quickly spread on the whitest linen.—Remember I had just left the vessel, where, without being fastidious, I had continually been disgusted. Fish, milk, butter, and cheese, and I am sorry to add, brandy, the bane of this country, were spread on the board. After we had dined, hospitality made them, with some degree of mystery, bring us some excellent coffee. I did not then know that it was prohibited.<sup>5</sup>

The good man of the house apologized for coming in continually, but declared that he was so glad to speak English, he could not stay out. He need not have apologized; I was equally glad of his company. With the wife I could only exchange smiles; and she was employed observing the make of our clothes. My hands, I found, had first led her to discover that I was the lady. I had, of course, my

quantum of reverences; for the politeness of the north seems to partake of the coldness of the climate, and the rigidity of its iron sinewed rocks. Amongst the peasantry, there is, however, so much of the simplicity of the golden age in this land of flint—so much overflowing of heart, and fellow-feeling, that only benevolence, and the honest sympathy of nature, diffused smiles over my countenance when they kept me standing, regardless of my fatigue, whilst they dropt courtesy after courtesy.

The situation of this house was beautiful, though chosen for convenience. The master being the officer who commanded all the pilots on the coast, and the person appointed to guard wrecks, it was necessary for him to fix on a spot that would overlook the whole bay. As he had seen some service, he wore, not without a pride I thought becoming, a badge to prove that he had merited well of his country. It was happy, I thought, that he had been paid in honor; for the stipend he received was little more than twelve pounds a year.—I do not trouble myself or you with the calculation of Swedish ducats. Thus, my friend, you perceive the necessity of *perquisites*.<sup>6</sup> This same narrow policy runs through every thing. I shall have occasion further to animadvert on it.

Though my host amused me with an account of himself, which gave me an idea of the manners of the people I was about to visit, I was eager to climb the rocks to view the country, and see whether the honest tars had regained their ship. With the help of the lieutenant's telescope I saw the vessel underway with a fair though gentle gale. The sea was calm, playful even as the most shallow stream, and on the vast bason<sup>7</sup> I did not see a dark speck to indicate the boat. My conductors were consequently arrived.

Straying further my eye was attracted by the sight of some heart's-ease<sup>8</sup> that peeped through the rocks. I caught at it as a good omen, and going to preserve it in a letter that had not conveyed balm to my heart, a cruel remembrance suffused my eyes; but it passed away like an April shower. If you are deep read in Shakspeare, you will recollect that this was the little western flower tinged by love's dart, which "maidens call love in idleness."<sup>9</sup> The

gaiety of my babe was unmixed; regardless of omens or sentiments, she found a few wild strawberries more grateful<sup>1</sup> than flowers or fancies.

The lieutenant informed me that this was a commodious bay. Of that I could not judge, though I felt its picturesque beauty. Rocks were piled on rocks, forming a suitable bulwark to the ocean. Come no further, they emphatically said, turning their dark sides to the waves to augment the idle roar. The view was sterile: still little patches of earth, of the most exquisite verdure, enameled with the sweetest wild flowers, seemed to promise the goats and a few straggling cows luxurious herbage. How silent and peaceful was the scene. I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France,<sup>2</sup> which had cast a gloom over all nature, and suffering the enthusiasm of my character, too often, gracious God! damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart.

To prolong this enjoyment, I readily assented to the proposal of our host to pay a visit to a family, the master of which spoke English, who was the drollest dog in the country, he added, repeating some of his stories, with a hearty laugh.

I walked on, still delighted with the rude beauties of the scene; for the sublime often gave place imperceptibly to the beautiful, dilating the emotions which were painfully concentrated.

When we entered this abode, the largest I had yet seen, I was introduced to a numerous family; but the father, from whom I was led to expect so much entertainment, was absent. The lieutenant consequently was obliged to be the interpreter of our reciprocal compliments. The phrases were awkwardly transmitted, it is true; but looks and gestures were sufficient to make them intelligible and interesting. The girls were all vivacity, and respect for me could scarcely keep them from romping with my host, who, asking for a pinch of snuff, was presented with a box, out of which an artificial

mouse, fastened to the bottom, sprung. Though this trick had doubtless been played time out of mind, yet the laughter it excited was not less genuine.

They were overflowing with civility; but to prevent their almost killing my babe with kindness, I was obliged to shorten my visit; and two or three of the girls accompanied us, bringing with them a part of whatever the house afforded to contribute towards rendering my supper more plentiful; and plentiful in fact it was, though I with difficulty did honor to some of the dishes, not relishing the quantity of sugar and spices put into every thing. At supper my host told me bluntly that I was a woman of observation, for I asked him *men's questions*.

The arrangements for my journey were quickly made; I could only have a car with post-horses, as I did not choose to wait till a carriage could be sent for to Gothenburg. The expense of my journey, about one or two and twenty English miles, I found would not amount to more than eleven or twelve shillings, paying, he assured me, generously. I gave him a guinea and a half. But it was with the greatest difficulty that I could make him take so much, indeed any thing for my lodging and fare. He declared that it was next to robbing me, explaining how much I ought to pay on the road. However, as I was positive, he took the guinea for himself; but, as a condition, insisted on accompanying me, to prevent my meeting with any trouble or imposition on the way.

I then retired to my apartment with regret. The night was so fine, that I would gladly have rambled about much longer; yet recollecting that I must rise very early, I reluctantly went to bed: but my senses had been so awake, and my imagination still continued so busy, that I sought for rest in vain. Rising before six, I scented the sweet morning air; I had long before heard the birds twittering to hail the dawning day, though it could scarcely have been allowed to have departed.

Nothing, in fact, can equal the beauty of the northern summer's evening and night; if night it may be called that only wants the glare of day, the full light, which frequently seems so impertinent; for I

could write at midnight very well without a candle. I contemplated all nature at rest; the rocks, even grown darker in their appearance, looked as if they partook of the general repose, and reclined more heavily on their foundation.—What, I exclaimed, is this active principle which keeps me still awake?—Why fly my thoughts abroad when every thing around me appears at home? My child was sleeping with equal calmness—innocent and sweet as the closing flowers.—Some recollections, attached to the idea of home, mingled with reflections respecting the state of society I had been contemplating that evening, made a tear drop on the rosy cheek I had just kissed; and emotions that trembled on the brink of ecstasy and agony gave a poignancy to my sensations, which made me feel more alive than usual.

What are these imperious sympathies? How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind;—I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion,<sup>3</sup> made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself—not, perhaps, for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence which loses its charms in proportion as the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart. Futurity, what hast thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness! I speak not of philosophical contentment, though pain has afforded them the strongest conviction of it.

After our coffee and milk, for the mistress of the house had been roused long before us by her hospitality, my baggage was taken forward in a boat by my host, because the car could not safely have been brought to the house.

The road at first was very rocky and troublesome; but our driver was careful, and the horses accustomed to the frequent and sudden acclivities and descents; so that not apprehending any danger, I

played with my girl, whom I would not leave to Marguerite's care, on account of her timidity.

Stopping at a little inn to bait<sup>4</sup> the horses, I saw the first countenance in Sweden that displeased me, though the man was better dressed than any one who had as yet fallen in my way. An altercation took place between him and my host, the purport of which I could not guess, excepting that I was the occasion of it, be it what it would. The sequel was his leaving the house angrily; and I was immediately informed that he was the custom-house officer. The professional had indeed effaced the national character, for living as he did with these frank hospitable people, still only the exciseman appeared,—the counterpart of some I had met with in England and France. I was unprovided with a passport, not having entered any great town. At Gothenburg I knew I could immediately obtain one, and only the trouble made me object to the searching my trunks. He blustered for money; but the lieutenant was determined to guard me, according to promise, from imposition.

To avoid being interrogated at the town-gate, and obliged to go in the rain to give an account of myself, merely a form, before we could get the refreshment we stood in need of, he requested us to descend, I might have said step, from our car, and walk into town.

I expected to have found a tolerable inn, but was ushered into a most comfortless one; and, because it was about five o'clock, three or four hours after their dining hour, I could not prevail on them to give me any thing warm to eat.

The appearance of the accommodations obliged me to deliver one of my recommendatory letters, and the gentleman, to whom it was addressed, sent to look out for a lodging for me whilst I partook of his supper. As nothing passed at this supper to characterize the country, I shall here close my letter.

Your's truly.

## Endnotes



- Note 2: Helsingør, Denmark. "Arendall": in Norway [ *Wollstonecraft's note*]. "Gothenburg": Göteborg, Sweden. Gilbert Imlay's business partner was based in this town. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A British gold coin worth one pound and a shilling. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Rape. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The law then prohibited the import or consumption of coffee. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Payments in addition to salary. The suggestion is of income derived from bribes or smuggling. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, basin. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A small wildflower, variously colored. Wollstonecraft goes on to make the first of many veiled allusions to her faithless lover Imlay, to whom these letters are addressed. [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Popular name for the pansy, whose juice Oberon put on the sleeping Titania's eyes to make her dote on the next person she saw (Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.165–72). [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Pleasing. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wollstonecraft had lived in France at the time of the Reign of Terror under Robespierre (1793–94). [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The physical attraction between two different substances. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Feed. [Return to reference 4](#)

### **From *Letter 5***

Had I determined to travel in Sweden merely for pleasure, I should probably have chosen the road to Stockholm, though convinced, by repeated observation, that the manners of a people are best discriminated in the country. The inhabitants of the capital are all of the same genus; for the varieties in the species we must, therefore, search where the habitations of men are so separated as to allow the difference of climate to have its natural effect. And with this difference we are, perhaps, most forcibly struck at the first view, just as we form an estimate of the leading traits of a character at the first glance, of which intimacy afterwards makes us almost lose sight.

As my affairs called me to Stromstad (the frontier town of Sweden) in my way to Norway, I was to pass over, I heard, the most uncultivated part of the country.<sup>5</sup> Still I believe that the grand features of Sweden are the same every where, and it is only the grand features that admit of description. There is an individuality in every prospect, which remains in the memory as forcibly depicted as the particular features that have arrested our attention; yet we cannot find words to discriminate that individuality so as to enable a stranger to say, this is the face, that the view. We may amuse by setting the imagination to work; but we cannot store the memory with a fact.

As I wish to give you a general idea of this country, I shall continue in my desultory manner to make such observations and reflections as the circumstances draw forth, without losing time, by endeavouring to arrange them.

\* \* \*

We arrived early the second evening at a little village called Quistram,<sup>6</sup> where we had determined to pass the night; having been informed that we should not afterwards find a tolerable inn until we reached Stromstad.

Advancing towards Quistram, as the sun was beginning to decline, I was particularly impressed by the beauty of the situation. The road was on the declivity of a rocky mountain, slightly covered with a mossy herbage and vagrant firs. At the bottom, a river, straggling amongst the recesses of stone, was hastening forward to the ocean and its grey rocks, of which we had a prospect on the left, whilst on the right it stole peacefully forward into the meadows, losing itself in a thickly wooded rising ground. As we drew near, the loveliest banks of wild flowers variegated the prospect, and promised to exhale odours to add to the sweetness of the air, the purity of which you could almost see, alas! not smell, for the putrifying herrings, which they use as manure, after the oil has been extracted, spread over the patches of earth, claimed by cultivation, destroyed every other.

It was intolerable, and entered with us into the inn, which was in other respects a charming retreat.

Whilst supper was preparing I crossed the bridge, and strolled by the river, listening to its murmurs. Approaching the bank, the beauty of which had attracted my attention in the carriage, I recognized many of my old acquaintance growing with great luxuriance.

Seated on it, I could not avoid noting an obvious remark. Sweden appeared to me the country in the world most proper to form the botanist and natural historian: every object seemed to remind me of the creation of things, of the first efforts of sportive nature. When a country arrives at a certain state of perfection, it looks as if it were made so; and curiosity is not excited. Besides, in social life too many objects occur for any to be distinctly observed by the generality of mankind; yet a contemplative man, or poet, in the country, I do not mean the country adjacent to cities, feels and sees what would escape vulgar eyes, and draws suitable inferences. This train of reflections might have led me further, in every sense of the word; but I could not escape from the detestable evaporation of the herrings, which poisoned all my pleasure.

After making a tolerable supper, for it is not easy to get fresh provisions on the road, I retired, to be lulled to sleep by the

murmuring of a stream, of which I with great difficulty obtained sufficient to perform my daily ablutions.

The last battle between the Danes and Swedes, which gave new life to their ancient enmity, was fought at this place 1788;<sup>7</sup> only seventeen or eighteen were killed; for the great superiority of the Danes and Norwegians obliged the Swedes to submit; but sickness, and a scarcity of provisions, proved very fatal to their opponents, on their return.

It would be very easy to search for the particulars of this engagement in the publications of the day; but as this manner of filling my pages does not come within my plan, I probably should not have remarked that the battle was fought here, were it not to relate an anecdote which I had from good authority.

I noticed, when I first mentioned this place to you, that we descended a steep before we came to the inn; an immense ridge of rocks stretching out on one side. The inn was sheltered under them; and about a hundred yards from it was a bridge that crossed the river, whose murmurs I have celebrated; it was not fordable. The Swedish general received orders to stop at the bridge, and dispute the passage; a most advantageous post for an army so much inferior in force: but the influence of beauty is not confined to courts. The mistress of the inn was handsome: when I saw her there were still some remains of beauty; and, to preserve her house, the general gave up the only tenable station. He was afterwards broke<sup>8</sup> for contempt of orders.

Approaching the frontiers, consequently the sea, nature resumed an aspect ruder and ruder, or rather seemed the bones of the world waiting to be clothed with every thing necessary to give life and beauty. Still it was sublime.

The clouds caught their hue of the rocks that menaced them. The sun appeared afraid to shine, the birds ceased to sing, and the flowers to bloom; but the eagle fixed his nest high amongst the rocks, and the vulture hovered over this abode of desolation. The farm houses, in which only poverty resided, were formed of logs scarcely keeping off the cold and drifting snow; out of them the

inhabitants seldom peeped, and the sports or prattling of children was neither seen nor heard. The current of life seemed congealed at the source: all were not frozen; for it was summer, you remember; but everything appeared so dull, that I waited to see ice, in order to reconcile me to the absence of gaiety.

The day before, my attention had frequently been attracted by the wild beauties of the country we passed through.

The rocks which tossed their fantastic heads so high were often covered with pines and firs, varied in the most picturesque manner. Little woods filled up the recesses, when forests did not darken the scene; and vallies and glens, cleared of the trees, displayed a dazzling verdure which contrasted with the gloom of the shading pines. The eye stole into many a covert where tranquillity seemed to have taken up her abode, and the number of little lakes that continually presented themselves added to the peaceful composure of the scenery. The little cultivation which appeared did not break the enchantment, nor did castles rear their turrets aloft to crush the cottages, and prove that man is more savage than the natives of the woods. I heard of the bears, but never saw them stalk forth, which I was sorry for; I wished to have seen one in its wild state. In the winter, I am told, they sometimes catch a stray cow, which is a heavy loss to the owner.

The farms are small. Indeed most of the houses we saw on the road indicated poverty, or rather that the people could just live. Towards the frontiers they grew worse and worse in their appearance, as if not willing to put sterility itself out of countenance. No gardens smiled round the habitations, not a potato or cabbage to eat with the fish drying on a stick near the door. A little grain here and there appeared, the long stalks of which you might almost reckon. The day was gloomy when we passed over this rejected spot, the wind bleak, and winter seemed to be contending with nature, faintly struggling to change the season. Surely, thought I, if the sun ever shines here, it cannot warm these stones; moss only cleaves to them, partaking of their hardness; and nothing like vegetable life appears to cheer with hope the heart.

So far from thinking that the primitive inhabitants of the world lived in a southern climate, where Paradise spontaneously arose, I am led to infer, from various circumstances, that the first dwelling of man happened to be a spot like this which led him to adore a sun so seldom seen; for this worship, which probably preceded that of demons or demi-gods, certainly never began in a southern climate, where the continual presence of the sun prevented its being considered as a good; or rather the want of it never being felt, this glorious luminary would carelessly have diffused its blessings without being hailed as a benefactor. Man must therefore have been placed in the north, to tempt him to run after the sun, in order that the different parts of the earth might be peopled. Nor do I wonder that hordes of barbarians always poured out of these regions to seek for milder climes, when nothing like cultivation attached them to the soil; especially when we take into the view that the adventuring spirit, common to man, is naturally stronger and more general during the infancy of society. The conduct of the followers of Mahomet,<sup>9</sup> and the crusaders, will sufficiently corroborate my assertion.

Approaching nearer to Stromstad, the appearance of the town proved to be quite in character with the country we had just passed through. I hesitated to use the word country, yet could not find another; still it would sound absurd to talk of fields of rocks.

The town was built on, and under them. Three or four weather-beaten trees were shrinking from the wind; and the grass grew so sparingly, that I could not avoid thinking Dr. Johnson's hyperbolical assertion "that the man merited well of his country who made a few blades of grass grow where they never grew before," might here have been uttered with strict propriety.<sup>1</sup> The steeple likewise towered aloft; for what is a church, even amongst the Lutherans, without a steeple? But to prevent mischief in such an exposed situation, it is wisely placed on a rock at some distance, not to endanger the roof of the church.

Rambling about, I saw the door open, and entered, when to my great surprise I found the clergyman reading prayers, with only the

clerk attending. I instantly thought of Swift's "Dearly beloved Roger;"<sup>2</sup> but on enquiry I learnt that some one had died that morning, and in Sweden it is customary to pray for the dead.

The sun, who I suspected never dared to shine, began now to convince me that he came forth only to torment; for though the wind was still cutting, the rocks became intolerably warm under my feet; whilst the herring effluvia, which I before found so very offensive, once more assailed me. I hastened back to the house of a merchant, the little sovereign of the place, because he was by far the richest, though not the mayor.

Here we were most hospitably received, and introduced to a very fine and numerous family. I have before mentioned to you the lillies of the north, I might have added, water lillies, for the complexion of many, even of the young women seem to be bleached on the bosom of snow. But in this youthful circle the roses bloomed with all their wonted freshness, and I wondered from whence the fire was stolen which sparkled in their fine blue eyes.

Here we slept; and I rose early in the morning to prepare for my little voyage to Norway. I had determined to go by water, and was to leave my companions behind; but not getting a boat immediately, and the wind being high and unfavourable, I was told that it was not safe to go to sea during such boisterous weather; I was therefore obliged to wait for the morrow, and had the present day on my hands; which I feared would be irksome, because the family, who possessed about a dozen French words amongst them, and not an English phrase, were anxious to amuse me, and would not let me remain alone in my room. The town we had already walked round and round; and if we advanced farther on the coast, it was still to view the same unvaried immensity of water, surrounded by barrenness.

The gentlemen wishing to peep into Norway, proposed going to Frederics-hall, the first town, the distance was only three Swedish miles.<sup>3</sup> There, and back again, was but a day's journey, and would not, I thought, interfere with my voyage. I agreed, and invited the eldest and prettiest of the girls to accompany us. I invited her,

because I liked to see a beautiful face animated by pleasure, and to have an opportunity of regarding the country, whilst the gentlemen were amusing themselves with her.

I did not know, for I had not thought of it, that we were to scale some of the most mountainous cliffs of Sweden, in our way to the ferry which separates the two countries.

Entering amongst the cliffs, we were sheltered from the wind; warm sun-beams began to play, streams to flow, and groves of pines diversified the rocks. Sometimes they became suddenly bare and sublime. Once, in particular, after mounting the most terrific precipice, we had to pass through a tremendous defile, where the closing chasm seemed to threaten us with instant destruction, when turning quickly, verdant meadows and a beautiful lake relieved and charmed my eyes.

I have never travelled through Switzerland; but one of my companions assured me, that I should not there find any thing superior, if equal to the wild grandeur of these views.

As we had not taken this excursion into our plan, the horses had not been previously ordered, which obliged us to wait two hours at the first post. The day was wearing away. The road was so bad, that walking up the precipices consumed the time insensibly. But as we desired horses at each post ready at a certain hour, we reckoned on returning more speedily.

We stopt to dine at a tolerable farm. They brought us out ham, butter, cheese, and milk; and the charge was so moderate, that I scattered a little money amongst the children who were peeping at us, in order to pay them for their trouble.

Arrived at the ferry, we were still detained; for the people who attend at the ferries have a stupid kind of sluggishness in their manner, which is very provoking when you are in haste. At present I did not feel it; for scrambling up the cliffs, my eye followed the river as it rolled between the grand rocky banks; and to complete the scenery, they were covered with firs and pines, through which the wind rustled, as if it were lulling itself to sleep with the declining sun.



Behold us now in Norway; and I could not avoid feeling surprise at observing the difference in the manners of the inhabitants of the two sides of the river; for everything shews that the Norwegians are more industrious and more opulent. The Swedes, for neighbours are seldom the best friends, accuse the Norwegians of knavery, and they retaliate by bringing a charge of hypocrisy against the Swedes. Local circumstances probably render both unjust, speaking from their feelings, rather than reason: and is this astonishing when we consider that most writers of travels have done the same, whose works have served as materials for the compilers of universal histories. All are eager to give a national character; which is rarely just, because they do not discriminate the natural from the acquired difference. The natural, I believe, on due consideration, will be found to consist merely in the degree of vivacity or thoughtfulness, pleasure, or pain, inspired by the climate, whilst the varieties which the forms of government, including religion, produce, are much more numerous and unstable.

A people have been characterized as stupid by nature; what a paradox! because they did not consider that slaves, having no object to stimulate industry, have not their faculties sharpened by the only thing that can exercise them, self-interest. Others have been brought forward as brutes, having no aptitude for the arts and sciences, only because the progress of improvement had not reached that stage which produces them.

Those writers who have considered the history of man, or of the human mind, on a more enlarged scale, have fallen into similar errors, not reflecting that the passions are weak where the necessities of life are too hardly or too easily obtained.

Travellers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stay at home. It is, for example, absurd to blame a people for not having that degree of personal cleanliness and elegance of manners which only refinement of taste produces, and will produce every where in proportion as society attains a general polish. The most essential service, I presume, that authors could render to society, would be to promote inquiry and discussion,

instead of making those dogmatical assertions which only appear calculated to gird the human mind round with imaginary circles, like the paper globe which represents the one he inhabits.

This spirit of inquiry is the characteristic of the present century, from which the succeeding will, I am persuaded, receive a great accumulation of knowledge; and doubtless its diffusion will in a great measure destroy the factitious national characters which have been supposed permanent, though only rendered so by the permanency of ignorance.

Arriving at Fredericshall, at the siege of which Charles XII lost his life,<sup>4</sup> we had only time to take a transient view of it, whilst they were preparing us some refreshment.

Poor Charles! I thought of him with respect. I have always felt the same for Alexander;<sup>5</sup> with whom he has been classed as a madman, by several writers, who have reasoned superficially, confounding the morals of the day with the few grand principles on which unchangeable morality rests. Making no allowance for the ignorance and prejudices of the period, they do not perceive how much they themselves are indebted to general improvement for the acquirements, and even the virtues, which they would not have had the force of mind to attain, by their individual exertions in a less advanced state of society.

The evening was fine, as is usual at this season; and the refreshing odour of the pine woods became more perceptible; for it was nine o'clock when we left Fredericshall. At the ferry we were detained by a dispute relative to our Swedish passport, which we did not think of getting countersigned in Norway. Midnight was coming on; yet it might with such propriety have been termed the noon of night, that had Young ever travelled towards the north, I should not have wondered at his becoming enamoured of the moon.<sup>6</sup> But it is not the queen of night alone who reigns here in all her splendor, though the sun, loitering just below the horizon, decks her with a golden tinge from his car, illuminating the cliffs that hide him; the heavens also, of a clear softened blue, throw her forward, and the evening star appears a lesser moon to the naked eye. The huge

shadows of the rocks, fringed with firs, concentrating the views, without darkening them, excited that tender melancholy which, sublimating the imagination, exalts, rather than depresses the mind.

My companions fell asleep:—fortunately they did not snore; and I contemplated, fearless of idle questions, a night such as I had never before seen or felt to charm the senses, and calm the heart. The very air was balmy, as it freshened into morn, producing the most voluptuous sensations. A vague pleasurable sentiment absorbed me, as I opened my bosom to the embraces of nature; and my soul rose to its author, with the chirping of the solitary birds, which began to feel, rather than see, advancing day. I had leisure to mark its progress. The grey morn, streaked with silvery rays, ushered in the orient beams,—how beautifully varying into purple!—yet, I was sorry to lose the soft watry clouds which preceded them, exciting a kind of expectation that made me almost afraid to breathe, lest I should break the charm. I saw the sun—and sighed.

One of my companions, now awake, perceiving that the postillion had mistaken the road, began to swear at him, and roused the other two, who reluctantly shook off sleep.

We had immediately to measure back our steps, and did not reach Stromstad before five in the morning.

The wind had changed in the night, and my boat was ready.

A dish of coffee, and fresh linen, recruited my spirits; and I directly set out again for Norway; purposing to land much higher up the coast.

Wrapping my great coat round me, I lay down on some sails at the bottom of the boat, its motion rocking me to rest, till a discourteous wave interrupted my slumbers, and obliged me to rise and feel a solitariness which was not so soothing as that of the past night.

Adieu!

- Note 5: Wollstonecraft has temporarily left behind in Gothenburg (modern-day Göteborg) her baby and the maid, Marguerite, and is now traveling north up Sweden's southwest coast to the border with Norway.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Located at about the halfway mark of the journey between Göteborg and the border.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A reference to the Russo-Swedish war of 1788–90, in which Sweden's foes Denmark and Norway became involved because of treaty obligations.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, stripped of his rank.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, Mohammed.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Probably thinking of his travelogue *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), which frequently deplores the barrenness of the Highlands, Wollstonecraft mistakenly ascribes to Samuel Johnson an assertion in fact uttered by the King of Brobdingnag in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Gulliver reports that King's opinion that whoever could make "two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before" served his nation more "than the whole race of politicians put together."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The prayer services that during 1700 Swift conducted as vicar of Laracor (in County Meath, Ireland) were thinly attended. The legend goes that he arrived in church one day to find nobody present except his clerk Roger Cox, which necessitated some rewording of the customary address to the congregation. Swift began the service with the words, "Dearly beloved Roger."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In an earlier note Wollstonecraft explains that a Swedish mile is nearly six English miles.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Charles XII was the celebrated warrior king, known as "the Lion of the North," who ruled Sweden from 1697 to 1718. He was shot while inspecting the trenches, as his army besieged a Norwegian fortress in what is now the modern town of Halden.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: There was debate through the 18th century as to whether the military conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323

B.C.E.) should be seen as glorious or criminal, heroic or insane. The linkage of Alexander and Charles XII was conventional: in a *Champion* essay of 1740 the novelist Henry Fielding had, for instance, depicted them both as brutal madmen.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: The third book of Edward Young's popular long poem *Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742–45) begins by invoking the moon as Young's muse.[Return to reference 6](#)

# MARIA EDGEWORTH

## 1768–1849

Maria Edgeworth's publishing career earned her more than £11,000—an enormous sum. It also made the novel, regularly reviled by critics in the late eighteenth century, a respectable form. After 1804, the editor Francis Jeffrey attended respectfully in the pages of his *Edinburgh Review* to each of Edgeworth's publications, remarking on how in her hands fiction had become an edifying medium for serious ideas.

Edgeworth was born in Oxfordshire on New Year's Day, 1768, the second child of Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Anna Maria Elers, who died when her daughter was five. (Richard Lovell Edgeworth married three more times, each new wife younger than her predecessor, and eventually fathered twenty-two children.) Maria Edgeworth spent most of her childhood in fashionable boarding schools in England, until her father, in a spirit of patriotism and optimism about social progress, decided to dedicate himself to the family estate in Ireland that had been his birthplace. In 1782 he sent for Maria to join him, his third wife, and Maria's half-brothers and half-sisters at Edgeworthstown, source of the Protestant Edgeworths' wealth since the early seventeenth century, when the property had been confiscated from a Catholic family. For the rest of her life, that manor house in rural County Longford would remain home for Edgeworth, who in 1802 rejected a marriage proposal from a Swedish diplomat.

Brimming over with children, with books, and (it was reported) with “ingenious mechanical devices” (some of them Richard Lovell Edgeworth’s inventions), this home doubled as a laboratory for her father’s experiments in education, up-to-the-minute agricultural techniques, and enlightened landlord-tenant relations. From the age of fourteen, Edgeworth assumed a central role in those experiments. She took up the business of estate management. She taught the younger children. At her father’s prompting, she began a course of reading in political and economic theory, starting with Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.

Eventually Maria Edgeworth also began to write. *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), a novelistic defense of women’s education, was followed by *The Parent’s Assistant* (1796) and *Practical Education* (1798), treatises on pedagogy she co-authored with her father, and by the first of her influential collections of stories for children (*Early Lessons*, 1801). In 1800 she published *Castle Rackrent*, her masterpiece. *Rackrent* inaugurated Edgeworth’s series of narratives memorializing the vanishing ways of life of rural Ireland, a project continued by *Ennui* (1809), *The Absentee* (1812), and *Ormond* (1819). Edgeworth’s study of the Enlightenment social sciences is easy to trace in these regional fictions, and these concerns were a factor that helped secure their reputation among the reviewers. Not only had Edgeworth managed to associate the novel with a more intellectually prestigious discourse but, by packaging her representations of Ireland’s picturesque folk culture in this way, she was also able to tap the authority of a system of economic and political analysis that, in its claims to be scientifically impartial, seemed to many to offer a counterweight to the ugly prejudices that were the legacies of that nation’s history of colonial conquest.

The year Richard Lovell Edgeworth settled in Ireland, 1782, seemed an auspicious moment for a reformer like him. The Parliament in Dublin had just won legislative independence, and it appeared as though penal laws targeting Catholics would soon be relaxed. But this confidence that a new era of civil harmony was

dawning was quickly shattered. In 1798 armed insurrection, involving both Catholic peasants and middle-class Protestants from the North, engulfed Ireland. The rising was soon repressed, with extreme brutality. Introduced in 1800 as a security measure by a British state horrified at the news that French expeditionary forces had planned to aid the rebels, an Act of Union abolished the Dublin Parliament and incorporated Ireland into the United Kingdom. However, as Byron observed in an address to the House of Lords, to call the ensuing political situation a union was to abuse the term: "If it must be called an Union, it is the union of the shark with his prey." The native Catholic population would long remain without civil rights. Indeed, when Edgeworth died in 1849 at the age of eighty-three, Ireland was once again a scene of violent insurrection as well as of horrendous famine.

An anecdote in Edgeworth's 1820 memoir of her father conveys a sense of the ambiguous position that the Protestant Anglo-Irish—neither English exactly, nor Irish, neither outsiders nor natives—occupied in this tense political context. Edgeworth recounts how, after their family escaped from the Catholic rebels who in 1798 occupied the countryside around Edgeworthstown, Richard Lovell Edgeworth was nearly lynched by a mob from the Protestant county town where the Edgeworths had taken refuge, who were certain (such were the suspicions aroused by his nonsectarian politics) that he was a rebel sympathizer and a French spy.

The 1802 tale that we have selected as an example of Maria Edgeworth's fiction, "The Irish Incognito"—part trickster tale from the folk tradition, part philosophical meditation on the precariousness of personal identity—also captures something of this experience of living between cultures. Starting with the first disorienting sentence, which introduces a hero who sports the ultra-English name of John Bull but who is also a native son of Cork, this treatment of cultural difference is distinguished by some slippery ironies. (A town on Ireland's south coast, Cork, of course, is home to the legendary Blarney Stone, which grants Irish people their gift of gab.) The tale might well have promoted tolerance for British



diversity among its original readers: unlike many of his namesakes of the era, this “John Bull” is eminently likeable. But (as with the more biting satires that Jonathan Swift had penned in Dublin eighty years before) it would also have perplexed these readers’ preconceived notions about *who* exactly was *who* within that hybrid political entity called “the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.”

## The Irish Incognito<sup>1</sup>

Sir John Bull was a native of Ireland, *bred* and *born* in the city of Cork. His real name was Phelim O'Mooney, and he was by profession a *stocah*, or walking gentleman; that is, a person who is too proud to earn his bread, and too poor to have bread without earning it. He had always been told that none of his ancestors had ever been in trade or business of any kind, and he resolved, when a boy, never to *demean* himself and family, as his elder brother had done, by becoming a rich merchant. When he grew up to be a young man, he kept this spirited resolution as long as he had a relation or friend in the world who would let him hang upon them; but when he was shaken off by all, what could he do but go into business? He chose the most genteel, however; he became a wine merchant. I'm *only* a wine merchant, said he to himself, and that is next door to being nothing at all. His brother furnished his cellars; and Mr. Phelim O'Mooney, upon the strength of the wine that he had in his cellars, and of the money he expected to make of it, immediately married a wife, set up a gig, and gave excellent dinners to men who were ten times richer than he even ever *expected* to be. In return for these excellent dinners, his new friends bought all their wine from Mr. O'Mooney, and never paid for it; he lived upon credit himself, and gave all his friends credit, till he became a bankrupt. Then nobody came to dine with him, and every body found out that he had been very imprudent; and he was obliged to sell his gig, but not before it had broken his wife's neck; so that when accounts came to be finally settled, he was not much worse than when he began the world, the loss falling upon his creditors, and he being, as he observed, free to begin life again, with the advantage of being once more a bachelor. He was such a good-natured, freehearted fellow, that every body liked him, even his creditors. His wife's relations made up the sum of five hundred pounds for him, and his brother offered to take him into his firm as partner; but O'Mooney preferred, he said, going to

try, or rather to make, his fortune in England, as he did not doubt but he should by marriage, being, as he did not scruple to acknowledge, a personable, clever-looking man, and a great favourite with the sex.<sup>2</sup>

"My last wife I married for love, my next I expect will do the same by me, and of course the money must come on her side this time," said our hero, half jesting, half in earnest. His elder and wiser brother, the merchant, whom he still held in more than sufficient contempt, ventured to hint some slight objections to this scheme of Phelim's seeking fortune in England. He observed that so many had gone upon this plan already, that there was rather a prejudice in England against Irish adventurers.

This could not affect *him* any ways, Phelim replied, because he did not mean to appear in England as an Irishman at all.

"How then?"

"As an Englishman, since that is most agreeable."

"How can that be?"

"Who should hinder it?"

His brother, hesitatingly, said "Yourself."

"Myself!—What part of myself? Is it my tongue?—You'll acknowledge, brother, that I do not speak with the brogue."

It was true that Phelim did not speak with any Irish brogue: his mother was an English woman, and he had lived much with English officers in Cork, and he had studied and imitated their manner of speaking so successfully, that no one, merely by his accent, could have guessed that he was an Irishman.

"Hey! brother, I say!" continued Phelim, in a triumphant English tone; "I never was taken for an Irishman in my life. Colonel Broadman told me the other day, I spoke English better than the English themselves; that he should take me for an Englishman, in any part of the known world, the moment I opened my lips. You must allow that not the smallest particle of brogue is discernible on my tongue."

His brother allowed that not the smallest particle of brogue was to be discerned upon Phelim's tongue, but feared that some Irish idiom might be perceived in his conversation. And then the name of O'Mooney!

"Oh, as to that, I need not trouble an act of parliament, or even a king's letter, just to change my name for a season; at the worst, I can travel and appear incognito."

"Always?"

"No: only just till I'm upon good terms with the lady—Mrs. Phelim O'Mooney, that is to be, God willing. Never fear, nor shake your head, brother; *you* men of business are out of this line, and not proper judges: I beg your pardon for saying so, but as you are my own brother, and nobody by, you'll excuse me."

His brother did excuse him, but continued silent for some minutes; he was pondering upon the means of persuading Phelim to give up this scheme.

"I would lay you any wager, my dear Phelim," said he, "that you could not continue four days in England incognito."

"Done!" cried Phelim. "Done for a hundred pounds; done for a thousand pounds, and welcome."

"But if you lose, how will you pay?"

"Faith! that's the last thing I thought of, being sure of winning."

"Then you will not object to any mode of payment I shall propose."

"None: only remembering always, that I was bankrupt last week, and shall be little better till I'm married; but then I'll pay you honestly if I lose."

"No, if you lose I must be paid before that time, my good sir," said his brother, laughing. "My bet is this:—I will lay you one hundred guineas that you do not remain four days in England incognito; be upon honour with me, and promise, that if you lose, you will, instead of laying down a hundred guineas, come back immediately, and settle quietly again to business."

The word *business* was always odious to our hero's proud ears; but he thought himself so secure of winning his wager, that he

willingly bound himself in a penalty which he believed would never become due; and his generous brother, at parting, made the bet still more favourable, by allowing that Phelim should not be deemed the loser unless he was, in the course of the first four days after he touched English ground, detected eight times in being an Irishman.

"Eight times!" cried Phelim. "Good bye to a hundred guineas, brother, you may say."

"You may say," echoed his brother, and so they parted.

Mr. Phelim O'Mooney the next morning sailed from Cork harbour with a prosperous gale, and with a confidence in his own success which supplied the place of auspicious omens. He embarked at Cork, to go by long sea to London, and was driven into Deal, where Julius Caesar once landed before him, and with the same resolution to see and conquer.<sup>3</sup> It was early in the morning; having been very sea-sick, he was impatient, as soon as he got into the inn, for his breakfast: he was shown into a room where three ladies were waiting to go by the stage; his air of easy confidence was the best possible introduction.

"Would any of the company choose eggs?" said the waiter.

"I never touch an egg for my share," said O'Mooney, carelessly; he knew that it was supposed to be an Irish custom to eat eggs at breakfast; and when the malicious waiter afterwards set a plate full of eggs in salt upon the table, our hero magnanimously abstained from them; he even laughed heartily at a story told by one of the ladies of an Hibernian at Buxton, who declared that "no English hen ever laid a fresh egg."

O'Mooney got through breakfast much to his own satisfaction, and to that of the ladies, whom he had taken a proper occasion to call the *three graces*,<sup>4</sup> and whom he had informed that he was an *old* baronet of an English family, and that his name was Sir John Bull. The youngest of the graces civilly observed, "that whatever else he might be, she should never have taken him for an *old* baronet." The lady who made this speech was pretty, but O'Mooney had penetration enough to discover, in the course of the conversation, that she and her companions were far from being divinities; his

three graces were a greengrocer's wife, a tallow chandler's widow, and a milliner. When he found that these ladies were likely to be his companions if he were to travel in the coach, he changed his plan, and ordered a post-chaise and four.

O'Mooney was not in danger of making any vulgar Irish blunders in paying his bill at an inn. No landlord or waiter could have suspected him, especially as he always left them to settle the matter first, and then looked over the bill and money with a careless gentility, saying, "Very right," or, "Very well, sir"; wisely calculating, that it was better to lose a few shillings on the road, than to lose a hundred pounds by the risk of Hibernian miscalculation.

Whilst the chaise was getting ready he went to the custom-house to look after his baggage. He found a red-hot countryman of his own there, roaring about four and fourpence, and fighting the battle of his trunks, in which he was ready to make affidavit there was not, nor never had been, any thing contraband; and when the custom-house officer replied by pulling out of one of them a piece of Irish poplin, the Hibernian fell immediately upon the Union, which he swore was Disunion, as the custom-house officers managed it. Sir John Bull appeared to much advantage all this time, maintaining a dignified silence; from his quiet appearance and deportment, the custom-house officers took it for granted that he was an Englishman. He was in no hurry; he begged *that* gentleman's business might be settled first; he would wait the officer's leisure, and as he spoke he played so dexterously with half-a-guinea between his fingers, as to make it visible only where he wished. The custom-house officer was his humble servant immediately; but the Hibernian would have been his enemy, if he had not conciliated him by observing, "that even Englishmen must allow there was something very like a bull in professing to make a complete identification of the two kingdoms, whilst, at the same time, certain regulations continued in full force to divide the countries by art, even more than the British channel does by nature."

Sir John talked so plausibly, and, above all, so candidly and coolly on Irish and English politics, that the custom-house officer conversed

with him for a quarter of an hour without guessing of what country he was, till in an unlucky moment Phelim's heart got the better of his head. Joining in the praises bestowed by all parties on the conduct of a distinguished patriot of his country, he, in the height of his enthusiasm, inadvertently called him *the Speaker*.

"The *Speaker*!" said the officer.

"Yes, the Speaker—*our* Speaker" cried Phelim, with exultation.<sup>5</sup> He was not aware how he had betrayed himself, till the officer smiled and said—

"Sir, I really never should have found out that you were an Irishman but from the manner in which you named your countryman, who is as highly thought of by all parties in this country as in yours: your enthusiasm does honour to your heart."

"And to my head, I'm sure," said our hero, laughing with the best grace imaginable. "Well, I am glad you have found me out in this manner, though I lose the eighth part of a bet of a hundred guineas by it."

He explained the wager, and begged the custom-house officer to keep his secret, which he promised to do faithfully, and assured him, "that he should be happy to do any thing in his power to serve him." Whilst he was uttering these last words, there came in a snug, but soft-looking Englishman, who opining from the words "happy to do any thing in my power to serve you," that O'Mooney was a friend of the custom-house officer's, and encouraged by something affable and good-natured in our hero's countenance, crept up to him, and whispered a request—"Could you tell a body, sir, how to get out of the custom-house a very valuable box of Sèvres china that has been *laying* in the custom-house three weeks, and which I was commissioned to get out if I could, and bring up to town for a lady."

As a lady was in the case, O'Mooney's gallantry instantly made his good-nature effective. The box of Sèvres china was produced, and opened only as a matter of form, and only as a matter of curiosity its contents were examined—a beautiful set of Sèvres china and a pendule, said to have belonged to M. Egalité!<sup>6</sup> "These things must

be intended," said Phelim, "for some lady of superior taste or fortune."

As Phelim was a proficient in the Socratic art of putting judicious interrogatories, he was soon happily master of the principal points it concerned him to know: he learnt that the lady was rich—a spinster—of full age—at her own disposal—living with a single female companion at Blackheath<sup>7</sup>—furnishing a house there in a superior style—had two carriages—her Christian name Mary—her surname Sharperson.

O'Mooney, by the blessing of God, it shall soon be, thought Phelim. He politely offered the Englishman a place in his chaise for himself and Sèvres china, as it was for a lady, and would run great hazard in the stage, which besides was full. Mr. Queasy, for that was our soft Englishman's name, was astonished by our hero's condescension and affability, especially as he heard him called Sir John: he bowed sundry times as low as the fear of losing his wig would permit, and accepted the polite offer with many thanks for himself and the lady concerned.

Sir John Bull's chaise and four was soon ready and Queasy seated in the corner of it, and the Sèvres china safely stowed between his knees. Captain Murray, a Scotch officer, was standing at the inn door, with his eyes intently fixed on the letters that were worked in nails on the top of Sir John's trunk; the letters were P. O'M. Our hero, whose eyes were at least as quick as the Scotchman's, was alarmed lest this should lead to a second detection. He called instantly, with his usual presence of mind, to the ostler, and desired him to uncord *that* trunk, as it was not to go with him; raising his voice loud enough for all *the yard* to hear, he added—"It is not mine at all; it belongs to my friend, Mr. O'Mooney: let it be sent after me, at leisure, by the waggon, as directed, to the care of Sir John Bull."

Our hero was now giving his invention a prodigious quantity of superfluous trouble; and upon this occasion, as upon most others, he was more in danger from excess than deficiency of ingenuity: he was like the man in the fairy tale, who was obliged to tie his legs lest



he should outrun the object of which he was in pursuit. The Scotch officer, though his eyes were fixed on the letters P. O'M., had none of the suspicions which Phelim was counteracting; he was only considering how he could ask for the third place in Sir John's chaise during the next stage, as he was in great haste to get to town upon particular business, and there were no other horses at the inn. When he heard that the heavy baggage was to go by the waggon, he took courage, and made his request. It was instantly granted by the good-natured Hibernian, who showed as much hospitality about his chaise as if it had been his house. Away they drove as fast as they could. Fresh dangers awaited him at the next inn. He left his hat upon the table in the hall whilst he went into the parlour, and when he returned, he heard some person inquiring what Irish gentleman was there. Our hero was terribly alarmed, for he saw that his hat was in the inquirer's hand, and he recollected that the name of Phelim O'Mooney was written in it. This the inquisitive gentleman did not see, for it was written in no very legible characters on the leather withinside of the front; but "F. Guest, hatter, Dame-street, Dublin," was a printed advertisement that could not be mistaken, and *that* was pasted within the crown. O'Mooney's presence of mind did not forsake him upon this emergency.

"My good sir," said he, turning to Queasy, who, without hearing one word of what was passing, was coming out of the parlour, with his own hat and gloves in his hand; "My good sir," continued he, loading him with parcels, "will you have the goodness to see these put into my carriage? I'll take care of your hat and gloves," added O'Mooney in a low voice. Queasy surrendered his hat and gloves instantly, unknowing wherefore; then squeezed forward with his load through the crowd, crying—"Waiter! hostler! pray, somebody put these into Sir John Bull's chaise."

Sir John Bull, equipped with Queasy's hat, marched deliberately through the defile, bowing with the air of at least an English county member<sup>8</sup> to this side and to that, as way was made for him to his carriage. No one suspected that the hat did not belong to him; no one, indeed, thought of the hat, for all eyes were fixed upon the

man. Seated in the carriage, he threw money to the waiter, hostler, and boots, and drew up the glass, bidding the postilions drive on. By this cool self-possession our hero effected his retreat with successful generalship, leaving his new Dublin beaver behind him, without regret, as *bona waviata*.<sup>9</sup> Queasy, before whose eyes things passed continually without his seeing them, thanked Sir John for the care he had taken of his hat, drew on his gloves, and calculated aloud how long they should be going to the next stage. At the first town they passed through, O'Mooney bought a new hat, and Queasy deplored the unaccountable mistake by which Sir John's hat had been forgotten. No further *mistakes* happened upon the journey. The travellers rattled on, and neither 'stinted nor stayed'<sup>1</sup> till they arrived at Blackheath, at Miss Sharperson's. Sir John sat Queasy down without having given him the least hint of his designs upon the lady; but as he helped him out with the Sèvres china, he looked through the large opening double doors of the hall, and slightly said—"Upon my word, this seems to be a handsome house: it would be worth looking at, if the family were not at home."

"I am morally sure, Sir John," said the soft Queasy, "that Miss Sharperson would be happy to let you see the house to-night, and this minute, if she knew you were at the door, and who you were, and all your civility about me and the china.—Do, pray, walk in."

"Not for the world: a gentleman could not do such a thing without an invitation from the lady of the house herself."

"Oh, if that's all, I'll step up myself to the young lady; I'm certain she'll be proud—"

"Mr. Queasy, by no means; I would not have the lady disturbed for the world at this unseasonable hour.—It is too late—quite too late."

"Not at all, begging pardon, Sir John," said Queasy, taking out his watch: "only just tea-time by me.—Not at all unseasonable for any body; besides, the message is of my own head:—all, you know, if not well taken—"

Up the great staircase he made bold to go on his mission, as he thought, in defiance of Sir John's better judgment. He returned in a

few minutes with a face of self-complacent exultation, *and* Miss Sharperson's compliments, and begs Sir John Bull will walk up and rest himself with a dish of tea, and has her thanks to him for the china.

Now Queasy, who had the highest possible opinion of Sir John Bull and of Miss Sharperson, whom he thought the two people of the greatest consequence and affability, had formed the notion that they were made for each other, and that it must be a match if they could but meet. The meeting he had now happily contrived and effected; and he had done his part for his friend Sir John, with Miss Sharperson, by as many exaggerations as he could utter in five minutes, concerning his prodigious politeness and courage, his fine person and carriage, his ancient family, and vast connections and importance wherever he appeared on the road, at inns, and over all England. He had previously, during the journey, done his part for his friend Miss Sharperson with Sir John, by stating that "she had a large fortune left her by her mother, and was to have twice as much from her grandmother; that she had thousands upon thousands in the funds, and an estate of two thousand a year, called Rascally, in Scotland, besides plate and jewels without end."

Thus prepared, how could this lady and gentleman meet without falling desperately in love with each other!

Though a servant in handsome livery appeared ready to show Sir John up the great staircase, Mr. Queasy acted as a gentleman usher, or rather as showman. He nodded to Sir John as they passed across a long gallery and through an ante-chamber, threw open the doors of various apartments as he went along, crying—"Peep in! peep in! peep in here! peep in there!—Is not this spacious? Is not this elegant? Is not that grand? Did I say too much?" continued he, rubbing his hands with delight. "Did you ever see so magnificent and such highly-polished steel grates out of Lon'on?"

Sir John, conscious that the servant's eyes were upon him, smiled at this question, "looked superior down;" and though with reluctant complaisance he leaned his body to this side or to that, as Queasy pulled or swayed, yet he appeared totally regardless of the man's

vulgar reflections. He had seen every thing as he passed, and was surprised at all he saw; but he evinced not the slightest symptom of astonishment. He was now ushered into a spacious, well lighted apartment: he entered with the easy, unembarrassed air of a man who was perfectly accustomed to such a home. His quick coup-d'oeil took in the whole at a single glance. Two magnificent candelabras stood on Egyptian tables<sup>2</sup> at the farther end of the room, and the lights were reflected on all sides from mirrors of no common size. Nothing seemed worthy to attract our hero's attention but the lady of the house, whom he approached with an air of distinguished respect. She was reclining on a Turkish sofa, her companion seated beside her, tuning a harp. Miss Sharperson half rose to receive Sir John: he paid his compliments with an easy, yet respectful air. He was thanked for his civilities to *the person* who had been commissioned to bring the box of Sèvres china from Deal.

"Vastly sorry it should have been so troublesome," Miss Sharperson said, in a voice fashionably unintelligible, and with a most becoming yet intimidating nonchalance of manner. Intimidating it might have been to any man but our hero; he, who had the happy talent of catching, wherever he went, the reigning manner of the place, replied to the lady in equal strains; and she, in her turn, seemed to look upon him more as her equal. Tea and coffee were served. *Nothings* were talked of quite easily by Sir John. He practised the art "not to admire," so as to give a justly high opinion of his taste, consequence, and knowledge of the world. Miss Sharperson, though her nonchalance was much diminished, continued to maintain a certain dignified reserve; whilst her companion, Miss Felicia Flat, condescended to ask Sir John, who had doubtless seen every fine house in England and on the continent, his opinion with respect to the furniture and finishing of the room, the placing of the Egyptian tables and the candelabras.

No mortal could have guessed by Sir John Bull's air, when he heard this question, that he had never seen a candelabra before in his life. He was so much, and yet seemingly so little upon his guard, he dealt so dexterously in generals, and evaded particulars so

delicately, that he went through this dangerous conversation triumphantly. Careful not to protract his visit beyond the bounds of propriety, he soon rose to take leave, and he mingled "intrusion, regret, late hour, happiness, and honour," so charmingly in his parting compliment, as to leave the most favourable impression on the minds of both the ladies, and to procure for himself an invitation to see the house next morning.

The first day was now ended, and our hero had been detected but once. He went to rest this night well satisfied with himself, but much more occupied with the hopes of marrying the heiress of Rascally than of winning a paltry bet.

The next day he waited upon the ladies in high spirits. Neither of them was *visible*, but Mr. Queasy had orders to show him the house, which he did with much exultation, dwelling particularly in his praises on the beautiful high polish of the steel grates. Queasy boasted that it was he who had recommended the ironmonger who furnished the house in that line; and that his bill, as he was proud to state, amounted to *many, many* hundreds. Sir John, who did not attend to one word Queasy said, went to examine the map of the Rascally estate, which was unrolled, and he had leisure to count the number of lords' and ladies' visiting tickets<sup>3</sup> which lay upon the chimney-piece. He saw names of the people of first quality and respectability: it was plain that Miss Sharperson must be a lady of high family as well as large fortune, else she would not be visited by persons of such distinction. Our hero's passion for her increased every moment. Her companion, Miss Flat, now appeared, and entered very freely into conversation with Sir John; and as he perceived that she was commissioned to sit in judgment upon him, he evaded all her leading questions with the skill of an Irish witness, but without giving any Hibernian answers. She was fairly at a fault. Miss Sharperson at length appeared, elegantly dressed; her person was genteel, and her face rather pretty. Sir John, at this instant, thought her beautiful, or seemed to think so. The ladies interchanged looks, and afterwards Sir John found a softness in his fair one's manner, a languishing tenderness in her eyes, in the tone

of her voice, and at the same time a modest perplexity and reserve about her, which altogether persuaded him that he was quite right, and his brother quite wrong *en fait d'amour*.<sup>4</sup> Miss Flat appeared now to have the most self-possession of the three, and Miss Sharperson looked at her, from time to time, as if she asked leave to be in love. Sir John's visit lasted a full half hour before he was sensible of having been five minutes engaged in this delightful conversation.

Miss Sharperson's coach now came to the door: he handed her into it, and she gave him a parting look, which satisfied him all was yet safe in her heart. Miss Flat, as he handed her into the carriage, said, "Perhaps they should meet Sir John at Tunbridge,<sup>5</sup> where they were going in a few days." She added some words as she seated herself, which he scarcely noticed at the time, but they recurred afterwards disagreeably to his memory. The words were, "I'm so glad we've a roomy coach, for of all things it annoys me to be *squeedged* in a carriage."

This word *squeedged*, as he had not been used to it in Ireland, sounded to him extremely vulgar, and gave him suspicions of the most painful nature. He had the precaution, before he left Blackheath, to go into several shops, and to inquire something more concerning his fair ladies. All he heard was much to their advantage; that is, much to the advantage of Miss Sharperson's fortune. All agreed that she was a rich Scotch heiress. A rich Scotch heiress, Sir John wisely considered, might have an humble companion who spoke bad English. He concluded that *squeedged* was Scotch, blamed himself for his suspicions, and was more in love with his mistress and with himself than ever. As he returned to town, he framed the outline of a triumphant letter to his brother on his approaching marriage. The bet was a matter, at present, totally beneath his consideration. However, we must do him the justice to say, that like a man of honour he resolved that, as soon as he had won the lady's heart, he would *candidly* tell her his circumstances, and then leave her the choice either to marry him or break her heart, as she pleased. Just as he had formed this generous

resolution, at a sudden turn of the road he overtook Miss Sharperson's coach: he bowed and looked in as he passed, when, to his astonishment, he saw, *squeezed* up in the corner by Miss Felicia, Mr. Queasy. He thought that this was a blunder in etiquette that would never have been made in Ireland. Perhaps his mistress was of the same opinion, for she hastily pulled down the blind as Sir John passed. A cold qualm came over the lover's heart. He lost no time in idle doubts and suspicions, but galloped on to town as fast as he could, and went immediately to call upon the Scotch officer with whom he had travelled, and whom he knew to be keen and prudent. He recollected the map of the Rascally estate, which he saw in Miss Sharperson's breakfast-room, and he remembered that the lands were said to lie in that part of Scotland from which Captain Murray came; from him he resolved to inquire into the state of the premises, before he should offer himself as tenant for life. Captain Murray assured him that there was no such place as Rascally in that part of Scotland; that he had never heard of any such person as Miss Sharperson, though he was acquainted with every family and every estate in the neighbourhood where she fabled hers to be. O'Mooney drew, from memory, the map of the Rascally estate. Captain Murray examined the boundaries, and assured him that his cousin the general's lands joined his own at the very spot which he described, and that unless two straight lines could enclose a space, the Rascally estate could not be found.

Sir John, naturally of a warm temper, proceeded, however, with prudence. The Scotch officer admired his sagacity in detecting this adventurer. Sir John waited at his hotel for Queasy, who had promised to call to let him know when the ladies would go to Tunbridge. Queasy came. Nothing could equal his astonishment and dismay when he was told the news.

"No such place as the Rascally estate! Then I'm an undone man! an undone man!" cried poor Queasy, bursting into tears: "but I'm certain it's impossible; and you'll find, Sir John, you've been misinformed. I would stake my life upon it, Miss Sharperson's a rich heiress, and has a rich grandmother. Why, she's five hundred pounds



in my debt, and I know of her being thousands and thousands in the books of as good men as myself, to whom I've recommended her, which I wouldn't have done for my life if I had not known her to be solid. You'll find she'll prove a rich heiress, Sir John."

Sir John hoped so, but the proofs were not yet satisfactory. Queasy determined to inquire about her payments to certain creditors at Blackheath, and promised to give a decisive answer in the morning. O'Mooney saw that this man was too great a fool to be a knave; his perturbation was evidently the perturbation of a dupe, not of an accomplice: Queasy was made to "be an anvil, not a hammer."<sup>6</sup> In the midst of his own disappointment, our good-natured Hibernian really pitied this poor currier.<sup>7</sup>

The next morning Sir John went early to Blackheath. All was confusion at Miss Sharperson's house; the steps covered with grates and furniture of all sorts; porters carrying out looking-glasses, Egyptian tables, and candelabras; the noise of workmen was heard in every apartment; and louder than all the rest, O'Mooney heard the curses that were denounced against his rich heiress—curses such as are bestowed on a swindler in the moment of detection by the tradesmen whom she has ruined.

Our hero, who was of a most happy temper, congratulated himself upon having, by his own wit and prudence, escaped making the practical bull of marrying a female swindler.

Now that Phelim's immediate hopes of marrying a rich heiress were over, his bet with his brother appeared to him of more consequence, and he rejoiced in the reflection that this was the third day he had spent in England, and that he had but once been detected.—The ides of March<sup>8</sup> were come, but not passed!

"My lads," said he to the workmen, who were busy in carrying out the furniture from Miss Sharperson's house, "all hands are at work, I see, in saving what they can from the wreck of *the Sharperson*. She was as well-fitted out a vessel, and in as gallant trim, as any ship upon the face of the earth."

"Ship upon the face of the *yearth*!" repeated an English porter with a sneer; "ship upon the face of the water, you should say,



master; but I take it you be's an Irishman."

O'Mooney had reason to be particularly vexed at being detected by this man, who spoke a miserable jargon, and who seemed not to have a very extensive range of ideas. He was one of those half-witted geniuses who catch at the shadow of an Irish bull. In fact, Phelim had merely made a lapsus linguae and had used an expression justifiable by the authority of the elegant and witty lord Chesterfield,<sup>9</sup> who said—no, who *wrote*—that the English navy is the finest navy *upon the face of the earth!* But it was in vain for our hero to argue the point; he was detected—no matter how or by whom. But this was only his second detection, and three of his four days of probation were past.

He dined this day at Captain Murray's. In the room in which they dined there was a picture of the captain, painted by Romney. Sir John, who happened to be seated opposite to it, observed that it was a very fine picture; the more he looked at it, the more he liked it. His admiration was at last unluckily expressed: he said, "That's an incomparable, an inimitable picture; it is absolutely *more like than the original.*"<sup>1</sup>

A keen Scotch lady in company smiled, and repeated, "*More like than the original!*" Sir John, if I had not been told by my relative here that you were an Englishman, I should have set you *doon*, from that speech, for an Irishman."

This unexpected detection brought the colour, for a moment, into Sir John's face; but immediately recovering his presence of mind, he said, "That was, I acknowledge, an excellent Irish bull; but in the course of my travels I have heard as good English bulls as Irish."

To this Captain Murray politely acceded, and he produced some laughable instances in support of the assertion, which gave the conversation a new turn.

O'Mooney felt extremely obliged to the captain for this, especially as he saw, by his countenance, that he also had suspicions of the truth. The first moment he found himself alone with Murray, our hero said to him, "Murray, you are too good a fellow to impose upon, even in jest. Your keen countrywoman guessed the truth—I am an

Irishman, but not a swindler. You shall hear why I conceal my country and name; only keep my secret till to-morrow night, or I shall lose a hundred guineas by my frankness."

O'Mooney then explained to him the nature of his bet. "This is only my third detection, and half of it voluntary, I might say, if I chose to higgler, which I scorn to do."

Captain Murray was so much pleased by this openness, that as he shook hands with O'Mooney, he said, "Give me leave to tell you, Sir, that even if you should lose your bet by this frank behaviour, you will have gained a better thing—a friend."

In the evening our hero went with his friend and a party of gentlemen to Maidenhead, near which place a battle was to be fought next day, between two famous pugilists, Bourke and Belcher.<sup>2</sup> At the appointed time the combatants appeared upon the stage; the whole boxing corps and the gentlemen *amateurs* crowded to behold the spectacle. Phelim O'Mooney's heart beat for the Irish champion Bourke; but he kept a guard upon his tongue, and had even the forbearance not to bet upon his countryman's head. How many rounds were fought, and how many minutes the fight lasted, how many blows were *put in* on each side, or which was the *game man* of the two, we forbear to decide or relate, as all this has been settled in the newspapers of the day; where also it was remarked, that Bourke, who lost the battle, "was put into a post-chaise, and left *standing* half an hour, while another fight took place. This was very scandalous on the part of his friends," says the humane newspaper historian, "as the poor man might possibly be dying."

Our hero O'Mooney's heart again got the better of his head. Forgetful of his bet, forgetful of every thing but humanity, he made his way up to the chaise, where Bourke was left. "How are you, my gay fellow?" said he. "Can you *see at all with the eye that's knocked out?*"

The brutal populace, who overheard this question, set up a roar of laughter: "A bull! a bull! an Irish bull! Did you hear the question this Irish gentleman asked his countryman?"

O'Mooney was detected a fourth time, and this time he was not ashamed. There was one man in the crowd who did not join in the laugh: a poor Irishman, of the name of Terence McDermod. He had in former times gone out a grousing, near Cork, with our hero; and the moment he heard his voice, he sprang forward, and with uncouth but honest demonstrations of joy, exclaimed, "Ah, my dear master! my dear young master! Phelim O'Mooney, Esq.<sup>3</sup> And I have found your honour alive again? By the blessing of God above, I'll never part you now till I die; and I'll go to the world's end to sarve yees."

O'Mooney wished him at the world's end this instant, yet could not prevail upon himself to check this affectionate follower of the O'Mooneys. He, however, put half a crown into his hand, and hinted that if he wished really to serve him, it must be at some other time. The poor fellow threw down the money, saying, he would never leave him. "Bid me do any thing, barring that. No, you shall never part me. Do what you please with me, still I'll be close to your heart, like your own shadow: knock me down if you will, and wilcome, ten times a day, and I'll be up again like a ninepin: only let me sarve your honour; I'll ask no wages nor take none."

There was no withstanding all this; and whether our hero's good-nature deceived him we shall not determine, but he thought it most prudent, as he could not get rid of Terence, to take him into his service, to let him into his secret, to make him swear that he would never utter the name of Phelim O'Mooney during the remainder of this day. Terence heard the secret of the bet with joy, entered into the jest with all the readiness of an Irishman, and with equal joy and readiness swore by the hind leg of the holy lamb that he would never mention, even to his own dog, the name of Phelim O'Mooney, Esq., good or bad, till past twelve o'clock; and further, that he would, till the clock should strike that hour, call his master Sir John Bull, and nothing else, to all men, women, and children, upon the floor of God's creation.

Satisfied with the fulness of this oath, O'Mooney resolved to return to town with his man Terence McDermod. He, however,

contrived, before he got there, to make a practical bull, by which he was detected a fifth time. He got into the coach which was driving *from* London instead of that which was driving *to* London, and he would have been carried rapidly to Oxford, had not his man Terence, after they had proceeded a mile and a half on the wrong road, put his head down from the top of the coach, crying, as he looked in at the window, "Master, Sir John Bull, are you there? Do you know we're in the wrong box, going to Oxford?"

"Your master's an Irishman, dare to say, as well as yourself," said the coachman, as he let Sir John out. He walked back to Maidenhead, and took a chaise to town.

It was six o'clock when he got to London, and he went into a coffee-house to dine. He sat down beside a gentleman who was reading the newspaper. "Any news to-day, sir?"

The gentleman told him the news of the day, and then began to read aloud some paragraphs in a strong Hibernian accent. Our hero was sorry that he had met with another countryman; but he resolved to set a guard upon his lips, and he knew that his own accent could not betray him. The stranger read on till he came to a trial about a legacy which an old woman had left to her cats. O'Mooney exclaimed, "I hate cats almost as much as old women; and if I had been the English minister, I would have laid the *dog-tax* upon cats."<sup>4</sup>

"If you had been the *Irish* minister, you mean," said the stranger, smiling; "for I perceive now you are a countryman of my own."

"How can you think so, sir?" said O'Mooney: "You have no reason to suppose so from my accent, I believe."

"None in life—quite the contrary; for you speak remarkably pure English—not the least note or half note of the brogue; but there's another sort of freemason sign by which we Hibernians know one another and are known all over the globe. Whether to call it a confusion of expressions or of ideas, I can't tell. Now an Englishman, if he had been saying what you did, sir, just now, would have taken time to separate the dog and the tax, and he would have put the tax

upon cats, and let the dogs go about their business." Our hero, with his usual good-humour, acknowledged himself to be fairly detected.

"Well, sir," said the stranger, "if I had not found you out before by the blunder, I should be sure now you were my countryman by your good-humour. An Irishman can take what's said to him, provided no affront's meant, with more good-humour than any man on earth."

"Ay, that he can," cried O' Mooney: "he lends himself, like the whale, to be tickled even by the fellow with the harpoon, till he finds what he is about, and then he pays away, and pitches the fellow, boat and all, to the devil. Ah, countryman! you would give me credit indeed for my good humour if you knew what danger you have put me in by detecting me for an Irishman. I have been found out six times, and if I blunder twice more before twelve o'clock this night, I shall lose a hundred guineas by it: but I will make sure of my bet; for I will go home straight this minute, lock myself up in my room, and not say a word to any mortal till the watchman cries 'past twelve o'clock,'—then the fast and long Lent of my tongue will be fairly over; and if you'll meet me, my dear friend, at the King's Arms, we will have a good supper and keep Easter for ever."

Phelim, pursuant to his resolution, returned to his hotel, and shut himself up in his room, where he remained in perfect silence and consequent safety till about nine o'clock. Suddenly he heard a great huzzaing in the street; he looked out of the window, and saw that all the houses in the street were illuminated. His landlady came bustling into his apartment, followed by waiters with candles. His spirits instantly rose, though he did not clearly know the cause of the rejoicings. "I give you joy, ma'am. What are you all illuminating<sup>5</sup> for?" said he to his landlady.

"Thank you, sir, with all my heart. I am not sure. It is either for a great victory or the peace. Bob—waiter—step out and inquire for the gentleman."

The gentleman preferred stepping out to inquire for himself. The illuminations were in honour of the peace.<sup>6</sup> He totally forgot his bet, his silence, and his prudence, in his sympathy with the general joy. He walked rapidly from street to street, admiring the various elegant

devices. A crowd was standing before the windows of a house that was illuminated with extraordinary splendour. He inquired whose it was, and was informed that it belonged to a contractor, who had made an immense fortune by the war.

"Then I'm sure these illuminations of his for the peace are none of the most sincere," said O'Mooney. The mob were of his opinion; and Phelim, who was now, alas! worked up to the proper pitch for blundering, added, by way of pleasing his audience still more—"If this contractor had *illuminated* in character, it should have been with *dark lanterns*."<sup>7</sup>

"Should it? by Jasus! that would be an Irish illumination," cried some one. "Arrah, honey! you're an Irishman, whoever you are, and have spoke your mind in character."

Sir John Bull was vexed that the piece of wit which he had aimed at the contractor had recoiled upon himself. "It is always, as my countryman observed, by having too much wit that I blunder. The deuce take me if I sport a single bon mot more this night. This is only my seventh detection, I have an eighth blunder still *to the good*; and if I can but keep my wit to myself till I am out of purgatory, then I shall be in heaven, and may sing Io triumph<sup>8</sup> in spite of my brother."

Fortunately, Phelim had not made it any part of his bet that he should not speak to himself an Irish idiom, or that he should not think a bull. Resolved to be as obstinately silent as a monk of La Trappe,<sup>9</sup> he once more shut himself up in his cell, and fell fast asleep—dreamed that fat bulls of Basan<sup>1</sup> encompassed him round about—that he ran down a steep hill to escape them—that his foot slipped—he rolled to the bottom—felt the bull's horns in his side—heard the bull bellowing in his ears—wakened—and found Terence McDermod bellowing at his room door.

"Sir John Bull! Sir John Bull! murder! murder! my dear master, Sir John Bull! murder, robbery, and reward! let me in! for the love of the Holy Virgin! they are all after you!"

"Who? are you drunk, Terence?" said Sir John, opening the door.

"No, but they are mad—all mad."

"Who?"

"The constable. They are all mad entirely, and the lord mayor, all along with your honour's making me swear I would not tell your name. Sure they are all coming armed in a body to put you in jail for a forgery, unless I run back and tell them the truth—will I?"

"First tell me the truth, blunderer!"

"I'll make my affidavit I never blundered, please your honour, but just went to the merchant's, as you ordered, with the draught, signed with the name I swore not to utter till past twelve. I presents the draught, and waits to be paid. 'Are you Mr. O'Mooney's servant?' says one of the clerks after a while. No, sir, not at all, sir," said I; "I'm Sir John Bull's, at your *service*." He puzzles and puzzles, and asks me did I bring the draught, and was that your writing at the bottom of it? I still said it was my master's writing, *Sir John Bull's*, and no other. They whispered from one up to t'other, and then said it was a forgery, as I overheard, and I must go before the mayor. With that, while the master, who was called down to be examined as to his opinion, was putting on his glasses to spell it out, I gives them, one and all, the slip, and whips out of the street door and home to give your honour notice, and have been breaking my heart at the door this half hour to make you hear—and now you have it all."

"I am in a worse dilemma now than when between the horns of the bull," thought Sir John: "I must now either tell my real name, avow myself an Irishman, and so lose my bet, or else go to gaol."

He preferred going to gaol. He resolved to pretend to be dumb, and he charged Terence not to betray him. The officers of justice came to take him up: Sir John resigned himself to them, making signs that he could not speak. He was carried before a magistrate. The merchant had never seen Mr. Phelim O'Mooney, but could swear to his handwriting and signature, having many of his letters and draughts. The draught in question was produced. Sir John Bull would neither acknowledge nor deny the signature, but in dumb show made signs of innocence. No art or persuasion could make him speak; he kept his fingers on his lips. One of the bailiffs offered to

open Sir John's mouth. Sir John clenched his hand, in token that if they used violence he knew his remedy. To the magistrate he was all bows and respect: but the law, in spite of civility, must take its course.

Terence McDermod beat his breast, and called upon all the saints in the Irish calender when he saw the committal actually made out, and his dear master given over to the constables. Nothing but his own oath and his master's commanding eye, which was fixed upon him at this instant, could have made him forbear to utter, what he had never in his life been before so strongly tempted to tell—the truth.

Determined to win his wager, our hero suffered himself to be carried to a lock-up house, and persisted in keeping silence till the clock struck twelve! Then the charm was broken, and he spoke. He began talking to himself, and singing as loud as he possibly could. The next morning Terence, who was no longer bound by his oath to conceal Phelim's name, hastened to his master's correspondent in town, told the whole story, and O'Mooney was liberated. Having won his bet by his wit and steadiness, he had now the prudence to give up these adventuring schemes, to which he had so nearly become a dupe; he returned immediately to Ireland to his brother, and determined to settle quietly to business. His good brother paid him the hundred guineas most joyfully, declaring that he had never spent a hundred guineas better in his life than in recovering a brother. Phelim had now conquered his foolish dislike to trade: his brother took him into partnership, and Phelim O'Mooney never relapsed into Sir John Bull.

1802

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Although written solely by Maria Edgeworth, "The Irish Incognito" forms the culminating chapter of a book that was published under both her name and her father's (her *Memoir o*



her father states that he contributed passages to a few of the other chapters). This book was the *Essay on Irish Bulls*, which went through three revised editions between 1802 and 1808, before being included, in its 1808 version, in Maria Edgeworth's eighteen-volume collected *Tales and Novels* of 1832. That edition provides the basis for the text we give here. A "bull" is verbal blunder, an expression containing a contradiction that goes unperceived by the speaker. To collect "Irish bulls" as the [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Women.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The Roman expeditionary force that invaded Britain in 55 B.C.E. landed in the southeast in the vicinity of the modern-day port of Deal. A later victory in Anatolia occasioned Caesar's boast about how he "came, saw, and conquered."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A flowery compliment: in classical mythology the three graces are sister goddesses who bestow beauty and charm.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: John Foster, Baron Oriel, the last man to serve as speaker in the Irish House of Commons, before its abolition by the Act of Union in 1801.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Cousin to King Louis XVI and himself in line for the throne of France, Philippe, Duke of Orleans (1747–1793) assumed the surname Egalité ("Equality") as testimony of his support for the Revolution. The name change did not save him from the guillotine. The duke's Sèvres—expensive porcelain manufactured near Paris—and pendule (a pendulum clock) appear to have come on the market following his execution.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: District of London.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: One of the members of Parliament who represented the counties of England.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: *Bona waviata* is a Latin term applied in law to stolen goods that have been thrown away by their thief, who would rather lose them than be caught red-handed. It is applied here

to the hero's "beaver," a type of hat made from beaver's fur.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: That is, by not stinting on money or food for the horses, they avoided any delay (stay).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Following the victory of the British fleet against the French at the Battle of the Nile (1798), furnishings in an Egyptian style were the height of fashion.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The cards left by the people paying social calls on Miss Sharperson.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In matters concerning love (French).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Tunbridge Wells, a fashionable spa town in southeast England.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, Queasy has not acted but been acted upon.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Someone who curries favor.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: March 15. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* 1.2, a soothsayer prophesies that Caesar will meet with danger on this date.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The hero's *lapsus linguae* (Latin for slip of the tongue) has a precedent in the writings of Philip Dormer Stanhope, the fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773), whose posthumously published letters to his illegitimate son secured him a reputation as a wit and a schemer.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: This bull was really made [*Edgeworth's note*]. George Romney (1734–1802) painted society portraits and rural scenes.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The reference is to actual historical figures of the early 19th century—the bare-knuckle boxers Jem Belcher and Joe Bourke.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: "Esquire"; designation given to men regarded as gentlemen.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: One of several new taxes introduced by Prime Minister William Pitt to finance Britain's war against France.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Decorating with lights as a sign of celebration.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Probably the truce signed between Britain and France in October 1801, temporarily suspending hostilities after eight years of war.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Lanterns equipped with slides that allow their light to be hidden.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Greek cry of triumph.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Alluding to the vows of silence taken by the monks of the French Abbey of La Trappe.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A recollection of Psalms 22:12, where the Psalmist describes his anguish at being forsaken: "strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round."[Return to reference 1](#)

# The Gothic and the Development of a Mass Readership

Strictly speaking, the Gothic is not “Gothic” at all, but a phenomenon that originates in the late eighteenth century, long after enlightened Europeans put the era of Gothic cathedrals, chivalry, and superstition behind them—a phenomenon that begins, in fact, as an embrace of a kind of counterfeit medievalism or as a “medieval revival.” As a word they applied to a dark and distant past, Gothic gave Romantic-period writers and readers a way to describe accounts of terrifying experiences in ancient castles and ruined abbeys—experiences connected with subterranean dungeons, secret passageways, flickering lamps, screams, moans, ghosts, and graveyards. In the long run Gothic became a label for the macabre, mysterious, supernatural, and terrifying, especially the *pleasurably* terrifying, in literature generally; the link that Romantic-period writers had forged between the Gothic and antiquated spaces was eventually loosened. Even so, one has only to look, in post-Romantic literature, at the fiction of the Brontës or Poe, or, in our own not-so-modern culture, at movies or computer games to realize that the pleasures of regression the late eighteenth-century Gothic revival provided die hard. Readers continue to seek out opportunities to feel haunted by pasts that will not let themselves be exorcised.

The Gothic revival appeared in later eighteenth-century English garden design and architecture before it got into literature. In 1747 Horace Walpole (1717–1797), younger son of the British prime minister, purchased Strawberry Hill, an estate on the river Thames near London, and three years later set about remodeling it in what he called a “Gothick” style. Adding towers, turrets, battlements, arched doors, windows, and ornaments of every description, he

created the kind of spurious medieval architecture that survives today mainly in churches and university buildings. Eventually tourists came from all over to see Strawberry Hill and went home to Gothicize their own houses.

When the Gothic made its appearance in literature, Walpole was again a trailblazer. In 1764 he published *The Castle of Otranto*, a self-styled “Gothic story” featuring a haunted castle, an early, pre-Byronic version of the Byronic hero (suitably named Manfred), mysterious deaths, a moaning ancestral portrait, damsels in distress, violent passions, and strange obsessions. Walpole’s gamble—that the future of the novel would involve the reclamation of the primitive emotions of fear and wonder provided by the romances of a pre-Enlightened age—convinced many writers who came after him. By the 1790s novels trading on horror, mystery, and faraway settings flooded the book market; meanwhile in theaters new special effects were devised to incarnate ghostly apparitions onstage. It is noteworthy that the best-selling author of the terror school (Ann Radcliffe), the author of its most enduring novel (Mary Shelley), and the author of its most effective send-up (Jane Austen) were all women. Indeed, many of Radcliffe’s numerous imitators (and, on occasion, downright plagiarizers) published under the auspices of the Minerva Press, a business whose very name (that of the goddess of wisdom) acknowledged the centrality of female authors and readers to this new lucrative trend in the book market. William Lane, the marketing genius who owned the press, also set up a cross-country network of circulating libraries that stocked his ladies’ volumes and made them available for hire at modest prices.

This section offers extracts from some of the most celebrated works in the Gothic mode: Walpole’s *Otranto* as the initiating prototype; two extremely popular works by Radcliffe, the “Queen of Terror,” *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); Matthew Lewis’s concoction of devilry, sadism, and mob violence, *The Monk* (1796). We also include an essay of 1773 in which John and Anna Letitia Aikin provide justification after the fact for Walpole’s rebellion against the critical orthodoxies. According to

most early critics of novels, the only *moral* fiction was probable fiction; the Aikins, however, make the business of the novelist lie as much with the pleasures of the imagination as with moral edification and the representation of real life.

The Aikins' essay suggests why Gothic reading was appealing to so many Romantic poets—visionaries who in their own way dissented from critical rules that would, drearily, limit literature to the already known and recognizable. Signs of the poets' acquaintance with the terror school of novel writing show up in numerous well-known Romantic poems—from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to *Manfred*. For instance, in Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*, a poem that in many respects represents an idealized tale of young love, Porphyro's invasion of Madeline's bedroom has some perturbing connections with the predatory overtones of the extract from *The Monk* reprinted here. And Keats's enigmatic fragment "This living hand" can be read as a brilliantly abbreviated version of the kind of tale of terror that aimed to make its reader's blood run cold.

Yet it simplifies matters to characterize the Gothic only as an influence on Romanticism. As the pieces by Coleridge in this section suggest, the poets had a love–hate relationship with Gothic writers and, even more so, with Gothic readers. Many contemporary commentators objected to the new school of novels on moral and technical grounds: they complained, for instance, about how plot driven they were and how cheaply they solved their mysteries. But questions about social class and literary taste were also important. In an era of revolution, in which newly literate workers were reading about "the rights of man" and crowds were starting to shape history, the very *popularity* of Gothic novels, the terror writers' capacity to move and manipulate whole crowds with their suspense and trickery, itself represented a source of anxiety. As the twentieth-century critic E. J. Clery explains, the "unprecedented capacity of the market to absorb at great speed large amounts of a particular type of literary product, the 'terrorist' novel, shook old certainties." Furthermore, terror had begun to seem a commodity produced on an assembly line.

Many of the Romantic poets comment, accordingly, on what is scary and pernicious *about* the Gothic as well as what is scary and pernicious *in* the Gothic. And throughout their writings, the tales of terror are invoked in ways that enable the writer to construct a divide between “high” and “low” culture and to play off the passive absorption associated with the reading of the crowds against the tasteful, active reading that is (according to the writer) practiced by the elite few. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance, Wordsworth identifies as a cause of English culture’s modern decline the “frenetic novels” that have blunted their consumers’ powers of discrimination and reduced them “to a state of almost savage torpor” (a negative version of the regression that William Hazlitt, for instance, celebrates as he describes how Radcliffe “makes her readers twice children” while she “forces us to believe all that is strange and next to impossible”). Wordsworth follows a hint that he may have found three years earlier in Coleridge’s review of *The Monk* (reprinted near the end of this section) and suggests that such readers inevitably need higher and higher doses of the “violent stimulants” that novelists—drug pushers of sorts—have supplied them. In this way the Preface pioneers an account of a mass readership addicted to what will kill it. In similar fashion our extract containing Coleridge’s very funny tirade against the patrons of circulating libraries makes it seem that novels were objects of utterly mindless consumption (absorbed, imbibed, but not *read*). The selections with which we close this section register, in other words, a recoil from the Gothic. But Gothic themes frequently come back to haunt the critics of the mode. When they depict popular, commercialized culture’s threat to individual autonomy and describe consumers as if they were zombies sunk in trances, the critics appear to rehearse nightmarish scenarios straight out of the tales of terror.

# HORACE WALPOLE

Horace Walpole's landmark work *The Castle of Otranto* initially purported to be a translation from (as the title page of the first edition put it) "the original Italian of Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto." The events related in it were supposed to have occurred in the twelfth or thirteenth century. In the second edition, however, Walpole (1717–1797) renounced the hoax and confessed his authorship. Rather than presenting the narrative as a remarkable historical discovery, a manuscript from the lost barbaric past, he cast his "Gothic Story" as a novelty: an experiment in blending, he explained, "the ancient and modern" romance, and in combining the realism that was the hallmark of the up-to-date eighteenth-century novel with the imagination that had flourished in medieval romance and that this realism had suffocated.

When the story opens, the villainous Manfred, prince of Otranto, to get an heir to his estate, has arranged a marriage between his only son, Conrad, and the beautiful Isabella. But on his wedding day Conrad is mysteriously killed, victim of a giant helmet that falls from the sky and crushes him. Lest he should be left without male descendants, Manfred determines to divorce his present wife, Hippolita, who is past childbearing, and marry Isabella himself. In the extract reprinted here, Isabella learns of his intention and decides to flee the castle by night. The account of her flight suggests how the Gothic novelists, lavishing attention on architectural details, make experiences of terror inseparable from the walls, ceilings, floors, and doors enclosing them.



## ***From The Castle of Otranto***

## **From *Chapter 1***

As it was now evening, the servant who conducted Isabella bore a torch before her. When they came to Manfred, who was walking impatiently about the gallery, he started and said hastily, "Take away that light, and begone." Then shutting the door impetuously, he flung himself upon a bench against the wall, and bade Isabella sit by him. She obeyed trembling. "I sent for you, lady," said he,—and then stopped under great appearance of confusion. "My lord!"—"Yes, I sent for you on a matter of great moment," resumed he,—"Dry your tears, young lady—you have lost your bridegroom.—Yes, cruel fate! and I have lost the hopes of my race!—but Conrad was not worthy of your beauty."—"How! my lord," said Isabella; "sure you do not suspect me of not feeling the concern I ought. My duty and affection would have always—" "Think no more of him," interrupted Manfred; "he was a sickly puny child, and heaven has perhaps taken him away that I might not trust the honours of my house on so frail a foundation. The line of Manfred calls for numerous supports. My foolish fondness for that boy blinded the eyes of my prudence—but it is better as it is. I hope in a few years to have reason to rejoice at the death of Conrad."

Words cannot paint the astonishment of Isabella. At first she apprehended that grief had disordered Manfred's understanding. Her next thought suggested that this strange discourse was designed, to ensnare her: she feared that Manfred had perceived her indifference for his son: and in consequence of that idea she replied, "Good my lord, do not doubt my tenderness: my heart would have accompanied my hand. Conrad would have engrossed all my care; and wherever fate shall dispose of me, I shall always cherish his memory, and regard your highness and the virtuous Hippolita as my parents." "Curse on Hippolita!" cried Manfred: "forget her from this moment as I do. In short, lady, you have missed a husband undeserving of your charms: they shall now be better disposed of. Instead of a sickly boy, you shall have a husband in the prime of his age, who will know how to value your beauties, and who may expect

a numerous offspring." "Alas! my lord," said Isabella, "my mind is too sadly engrossed by the recent catastrophe in your family to think of another marriage. If ever my father returns, and it shall be his pleasure, I shall obey, as I did when I consented to give my hand to your son: but until his return, permit me to remain under your hospitable roof, and employ the melancholy hours in assuaging yours, Hippolita's, and the fair Matilda's affliction."

"I desired you once before," said Manfred angrily, "not to name that woman: from this hour she must be a stranger to you, as she must be to me;—in short, Isabella, since I cannot give you my son, I offer you myself."—"Heavens!" cried Isabella, waking from her delusion, "what do I hear! You! My lord! You! My father-in-law! the father of Conrad! the husband of the virtuous and tender Hippolita!"—"I tell you," said Manfred imperiously, "Hippolita is no longer my wife; I divorce her from this hour. Too long has she cursed me by her unfruitfulness: my fate depends on having sons,—and this night I trust will give a new date to my hopes." At those words he seized the cold hand of Isabella, who was half-dead with fright and horror. She shrieked and started from him. Manfred rose to pursue her, when the moon, which was now up and gleamed in at the opposite casement, presented to his sight the plumes of the fatal helmet, which rose to the height of the windows, waving backwards and forwards in a tempestuous manner, and accompanied with a hollow and rustling sound. Isabella, who gathered courage from her situation, and who dreaded nothing so much as Manfred's pursuit of his declaration, cried, "Look! my lord; see, heaven itself declares against your impious intentions!"—"Heaven nor hell shall impede my designs," said Manfred, advancing again to seize the princess. At that instant the portrait of his grandfather, which hung over the bench where they had been sitting, uttered a deep sigh, and heaved its breast. Isabella, whose back was turned to the picture, saw not the motion, nor knew whence the sound came, but started, and said, "Hark, my lord! What sound was that?" and at the same time made towards the door. Manfred, distracted between the flight of Isabella, who had now reached the stairs, and yet unable to keep his

eyes from the picture, which began to move, had however advanced some steps after her, still looking backwards on the portrait, when he saw it quit its panel, and descend on the floor with a grave and melancholy air. "Do I dream?" cried Manfred returning, "or are the devils themselves in league against me? Speak, infernal spectre! or, if thou art my grandsire, why dost thou too conspire against thy wretched descendant, who too dearly pays for—" Ere he could finish the sentence the vision sighed again, and made a sign to Manfred to follow him. "Lead on!" cried Manfred; "I will follow thee to the gulph of perdition." The spectre marched sedately, but dejected, to the end of the gallery, and turned into a chamber on the right hand. Manfred accompanied him at a little distance, full of anxiety and horror, but resolved. As he would have entered the chamber, the door was clapped to with violence by an invisible hand. The prince, collecting courage from this delay, would have forcibly burst open the door with his foot, but found that it resisted his utmost efforts. "Since hell will not satisfy my curiosity," said Manfred, "I will use the human means in my power for preserving my race; Isabella shall not escape me."

That lady, whose resolution had given way to terror the moment she had quitted Manfred, continued her flight to the bottom of the principal staircase. There she stopped, not knowing whither to direct her steps, nor how to escape from the impetuosity of the prince. The gates of the castle she knew were locked, and guards placed in the court. Should she, as her heart prompted her, go and prepare Hippolita for the cruel destiny that awaited her, she did not doubt but Manfred would seek her there, and that his violence would incite him to double the injury he meditated, without leaving room for them to avoid the impetuosity of his passions. Delay might give him time to reflect on the horrid measures he had conceived, or produce some circumstance in her favour, if she could for that night at least avoid his odious purpose.—Yet where conceal herself? how avoid the pursuit he would infallibly make throughout the castle? As these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, she recollected a subterraneous passage which led from the vaults of the castle to the

church of St. Nicholas. Could she reach the altar before she was overtaken, she knew even Manfred's violence would not dare to profane the sacredness of the place; and she determined, if no other means of deliverance offered, to shut herself up for ever among the holy virgins, whose convent was contiguous to the cathedral. In this resolution, she seized a lamp that burned at the foot of the staircase, and hurried towards the secret passage. The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern. An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which, grating on the rusty hinges, were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. Every murmur struck her with new terror;—yet more she dreaded to hear the wrathful voice of Manfred urging his domestics<sup>1</sup> to pursue her. She trod as softly as impatience would give her leave, —yet frequently stopped and listened to hear if she was followed. In one of those moments she thought she heard a sigh. She shuddered, and recoiled a few paces. In a moment she thought she heard the step of some person. Her blood curdled; she concluded it was Manfred. Every suggestion that horror could inspire rushed into her mind. She condemned her rash flight, which had thus exposed her to his rage in a place where her cries were not likely to draw anybody to her assistance.—Yet the sound seemed not to come from behind,—if Manfred knew where she was, he must have followed her: she was still in one of the cloisters, and the steps she had heard were too distinct to proceed from the way she had come. Cheered with this reflection, and hoping to find a friend in whoever was not the prince, she was going to advance, when a door that stood ajar, at some distance to the left, was opened gently: but ere her lamp, which she held up, could discover who opened it, the person retreated precipitately on seeing the light.

Isabella, whom every incident was sufficient to dismay, hesitated whether she should proceed. Her dread of Manfred soon outweighed every other terror. The very circumstance of the person avoiding her

gave her a sort of courage. It could only be, she thought, some domestic belonging to the castle. Her gentleness had never raised her an enemy, and conscious innocence bade her hope that, unless sent by the prince's order to seek her, his servants would rather assist than prevent her flight. Fortifying herself with these reflections, and believing, by what she could observe, that she was near the mouth of the subterraneous cavern, she approached the door that had been opened; but a sudden gust of wind that met her at the door extinguished her lamp, and left her in total darkness.

1764

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Servants. [Return to reference 1](#)

## **ANNA LETITIA AIKIN (LATER BARBAULD) AND JOHN AIKIN**

In the following essay John Aikin (1747–1822) and his sister Anna Letitia (who appears earlier in this anthology as a poet and under her married name, Barbauld) engage a question philosophers and psychologists continue to debate: why do people who listen to ghost stories around the campfire, or read Gothic novels, or watch monster movies find such frightening experiences pleasing? The Aikins, members of a prominent family of religious dissenters and educators, begin by observing that it is easy to explain why we might feel satisfaction when we feel pity—that emotion is necessary for the well-being of the human community, which would fall apart were it not somehow in our own interest to feel for others. But it is by contrast more difficult to understand how morality is advanced when we delight in objects of terror. As they map out an alternative way of accounting for that amoral delight, the Aikins write an early Romantic description of the glory of the imagination; the reader's encounter with what is unknown and amazing elevates and expands the mind. The fragmentary story of a medieval knight errant that the Aikins appended to their essay was meant to give their readers a chance to test this thesis, but thanks to its handling of suspense "Sir Bertrand" soon came to be celebrated in its own right.

Published in 1773 in the Aikins' *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" built on Walpole's innovation in *Otranto*. It gave the next generation of Gothic authors a critical justification for their engagement with the supernatural and for their swerve away from the didacticism that had valued fiction writers only when they seemed to be educating readers for real life. Family tradition ascribed the essay to Anna and "Sir Bertrand" to John.

## On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror; with Sir Bertrand, a Fragment

That the exercise of our benevolent feelings, as called forth by the view of human afflictions, should be a source of pleasure, cannot appear wonderful to one who considers that relation between the moral and natural system of man, which has connected a degree of satisfaction with every action or emotion productive of the general welfare. The painful sensation immediately arising from a scene of misery, is so much softened and alleviated by the reflex sense of self-approbation on attending virtuous sympathy, that we find, on the whole, a very exquisite and refined pleasure remaining, which makes us desirous of again being witnesses to such scenes, instead of flying from them with disgust and horror. It is obvious how greatly such a provision must conduce to the ends of mutual support and assistance. But the apparent delight with which we dwell upon objects of pure terror, where our moral feelings are not in the least concerned, and no passion seems to be excited but the depressing one of fear, is a paradox of the heart, much more difficult of solution.

The reality of this source of pleasure seems evident from daily observation. The greediness with which the tales of ghosts and goblins, of murders, earthquakes, fires, shipwrecks, and all the most terrible disasters attending human life, are devoured by every ear, must have been generally remarked. Tragedy, the most favourite work of fiction, has taken a full share of those scenes; "it has supt full with horrors"<sup>1</sup>—and has, perhaps, been more indebted to them for public admiration than to its tender and pathetic parts. The ghost of Hamlet, Macbeth descending into the witches' cave, and the tent scene in Richard, command as forcibly the attention of our souls as the parting of Jaffeir and Belvidera, the fall of Wolsey, or the death of Shore.<sup>2</sup> The inspiration of *terror* was by the antient critics



assigned as the peculiar province of tragedy; and the Greek and Roman tragedians have introduced some extraordinary personages for this purpose: not only the shades of the dead, but the furies, and other fabulous inhabitants of the infernal regions. Collins, in his most poetical ode to Fear, has finely enforced this idea.

Tho' gently Pity claim her mingled part,  
Yet all the thunders of the scene are thine.<sup>3</sup>

The old Gothic romance and the Eastern tale, with their genii, giants, enchantments, and transformations, however a refined critic may censure them as absurd and extravagant, will ever retain a most powerful influence on the mind, and interest the reader independently of all peculiarity of taste. Thus the great Milton, who had a strong bias to these wildnesses of the imagination, has with striking effect made the stories "of forests and enchantments drear," a favourite subject with his *Penseroso*; and had undoubtedly their awakening images strong upon his mind when he breaks out,

Call up him that left half-told  
The story of Cambuscan bold; &c.<sup>4</sup>

How are we then to account for the pleasure derived from such objects? I have often been led to imagine that there is a deception in these cases; and that the avidity with which we attend is not a proof of our receiving real pleasure. The pain of suspense, and the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity, when once raised, will account for our eagerness to go quite through an adventure, though we suffer actual pain during the whole course of it. We rather chuse to suffer the smart pang of a violent emotion than the uneasy craving of an unsatisfied desire. That this principle, in many instances, may involuntarily carry us through what we dislike, I am convinced from experience. This is the impulse which renders the poorest and most insipid narrative interesting when once we get fairly into it; and I have frequently felt it with regard to our modern

novels, which, if lying on my table, and taken up in an idle hour, have led me through the most tedious and disgusting pages, while, like Pistol eating his leek, I have swallowed and execrated to the end.<sup>5</sup> And it will not only force us through dullness, but through actual torture—through the relation of a Damien's execution, or an inquisitor's act of faith.<sup>6</sup> When children, therefore, listen with pale and mute attention to the frightful stories of apparitions, we are not, perhaps, to imagine that they are in a state of enjoyment, any more than the poor bird which is dropping into the mouth of the rattlesnake—they are chained by the ears, and fascinated by curiosity. This solution, however, does not satisfy me with respect to the well-wrought scenes of artificial terror which are formed by a sublime and vigorous imagination. Here, though we know beforehand what to expect, we enter into them with eagerness, in quest of a pleasure already experienced. This is the pleasure constantly attached to the excitement of surprise from new and wonderful objects. A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of "forms unseen, and mightier far than we," our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers. Passion and fancy cooperating elevate the soul to its highest pitch; and the pain of terror is lost in amazement.

Hence the more wild, fanciful, and extraordinary are the circumstance, of a scene of horror, the more pleasure we receive from it; and where they are too near common nature, though violently borne by curiosity through the adventure, we cannot repeat it or reflect on it, without an overbalance of pain. In the *Arabian Nights* are many most striking examples of the terrible joined with the marvellous: the story of Aladdin, and the travels of Sinbad are particularly excellent. The *Castle of Otranto* is a very spirited modern attempt upon the same plan of mixed terror, adapted to the model of Gothic romance. The best conceived, and most strongly worked-up scene of mere natural horror that I recollect, is in Smollett's *Ferdinand Count Fathom*;<sup>7</sup> where the hero, entertained in a lone

house in a forest, finds a corpse just slaughtered in the room where he is sent to sleep, and the door of which is locked upon him. It may be amusing for the reader to compare his feelings upon these, and from thence form his opinion of the justness of my theory. The following fragment, in which both these manners are attempted to be in some degree united, is offered to entertain a solitary winter's evening.

### ***Sir Bertrand, a Fragment***

After this adventure, Sir Bertrand turned his steed towards the woulds,<sup>8</sup> hoping to cross these dreary moors before the curfew. But ere he had proceeded half his journey, he was bewildered by the different tracks, and not being able, as far as the eye could reach, to espy any object but the brown heath surrounding him, he was at length quite uncertain which way he should direct his course. Night overtook him in this situation. It was one of those nights when the moon gives a faint glimmering of light through the thick black clouds of a lowering sky. Now and then she suddenly emerged in full splendor from her veil; and then instantly retired behind it, having just served to give the forlorn Sir Bertrand a wide extended prospect over the desolate waste. Hope and native courage a while urged him to push forwards, but at length the increasing darkness and fatigue of body and mind overcame him; he dreaded moving from the ground he stood on, for fear of unknown pits and bogs, and alighting from his horse in despair, he threw himself on the ground. He had not long continued in that posture when the sullen toll of a distant bell struck his ears—he started up, and turning towards the sound discerned a dim twinkling light.

Instantly he seized his horse's bridle, and with cautious steps advanced towards it. After a painful march he was stopt by a moated ditch surrounding the place from whence the light proceeded; and by a momentary glimpse of moon-light he had a full view of a large antique mansion, with turrets at the corners, and an ample porch in the centre. The injuries of time were strongly marked

on every thing about it. The roof in various places was fallen in, the battlements were half demolished, and the windows broken and dismantled. A drawbridge, with a ruinous gateway at each end, led to the court before the building—He entered, and instantly the light, which proceeded from a window in one of the turrets, glided along and vanished; at the same moment the moon sunk beneath a black cloud, and the night was darker than ever. All was silent—Sir Bertrand fastened his steed under a shed, and approaching the house traversed its whole front with light and slow footsteps—All was still as death—He looked in at the lower windows, but could not distinguish a single object through the impenetrable gloom. After a short parley with himself, he entered the porch, and seizing a massy iron knocker at the gate, lifted it up, and hesitating, at length struck a loud stroke. The noise resounded through the whole mansion with hollow echoes. All was still again—He repeated the strokes more boldly and louder—another interval of silence ensued—A third time he knocked, and a third time all was still. He then fell back to some distance that he might discern whether any light could be seen in the whole front—It again appeared in the same place and quickly glided away as before—at the same instant a deep sullen toll sounded from the turret. Sir Bertrand's heart made a fearful stop—He was a while motionless; then terror impelled him to make some hasty steps towards his steed—but shame stopt his flight; and urged by honour, and a resistless desire of finishing the adventure, he returned to the porch; and working up his soul to a full steadiness of resolution, he drew forth his sword with one hand, and with the other lifted up the latch of the gate. The heavy door, creaking upon its hinges, reluctantly yielded to his hand—he applied his shoulder to it and forced it open—he quitted it and stept forward—the door instantly shut with a thundering clap. Sir Bertrand's blood was chilled—he turned back to find the door, and it was long ere his trembling hands could seize it—but his utmost strength could not open it again. After several ineffectual attempts, he looked behind him, and beheld, across a hall, upon a large staircase, a pale bluish flame which cast a dismal gleam of light around. He again summoned forth his courage and advanced towards it—It retired. He came to the foot

of the stairs, and after a moment's deliberation ascended. He went slowly up, the flame retiring before him, till he came to a wide gallery—The flame proceeded along it, and he followed in silent horror, treading lightly, for the echoes of his footsteps startled him. It led him to the foot of another staircase, and then vanished—At the same instant another toll sounded from the turret—Sir Bertrand felt it strike upon his heart. He was now in total darkness, and with his arms extended, began to ascend the second staircase. A dead cold hand met his left hand and firmly grasped it, drawing him forcibly forwards—he endeavoured to disengage himself, but could not—he made a furious blow with his sword, and instantly a loud shriek pierced his ears, and the dead hand was left powerless in his—He dropt it, and rushed forwards with a desperate valour. The stairs were narrow and winding, and interrupted by frequent breaches, and loose fragments of stone. The staircase grew narrower and narrower and at length terminated in a low iron grate. Sir Bertrand pushed it open—it led to an intricate winding passage, just large enough to admit a person upon his hands and knees. A faint glimmering of light served to show the nature of the place. Sir Bertrand entered—A deep hollow groan resounded from a distance through the vault—He went forwards, and proceeding beyond the first turning, he discerned the same blue flame which had before conducted him. He followed it. The vault, at length, suddenly opened into a lofty gallery, in the midst of which a figure appeared, compleatly armed, thrusting forwards the bloody stump of an arm, with a terrible frown and menacing gesture, and brandishing a sword in his hand. Sir Bertrand undauntedly sprung forwards; and aiming a fierce blow at the figure, it instantly vanished, letting fall a massy iron key. The flame now rested upon a pair of ample folding doors at the end of the gallery. Sir Bertrand went up to it, and applied the key to a brazen lock—with difficulty he turned the bolt—instantly the doors flew open, and discovered a large apartment, at the end of which was a coffin rested upon a bier, with a taper burning on each side of it. Along the room on both sides were gigantic statues of black marble, attired in the Moorish habit, and holding enormous sabres in their right hands. Each of them reared his arm, and

advanced one leg forwards, as the knight entered; at the same moment the lid of the coffin flew open, and the bell tolled. The flame still glided forwards, and Sir Bertrand resolutely followed, till he arrived within six paces of the coffin. Suddenly, a lady in a shroud and black veil rose up in it, and stretched out her arms towards him—at the same time the statues clashed their sabres and advanced. Sir Bertrand flew to the lady and clasped her in his arms—she threw up her veil and kissed his lips; and instantly the whole building shook as with an earthquake, and fell asunder with a horrible crash. Sir Bertrand was thrown into a sudden trance, and on recovering, found himself seated on a velvet sofa, in the most magnificent room he had ever seen, lighted with innumerable tapers, in lustres of pure crystal. A sumptuous banquet was set in the middle. The doors opening to soft music, a lady of incomparable beauty, attired with amazing splendour entered, surrounded by a troop of gay nymphs far more fair than the Graces—She advanced to the knight, and falling on her knees thanked him as her deliverer. The nymphs placed a garland of laurel on his head, and the lady led him by the hand to the banquet, and sat beside him. The nymphs placed themselves at the table, and a numerous train of servants entering, served up the feast; delicious music playing all the time. Sir Bertrand could not speak for astonishment—he could only return their honours by courteous looks and gestures. After the banquet was finished, all retired but the lady, who leading back the knight to the sofa, addressed him in these words:—<sup>9</sup>

1773

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 5.5.13. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The mentions of Hamlet, Macbeth, and Richard III are followed by references to the doomed husband and wife in Thomas Otway's tragedy *Venice Preserv'd* (1681), the royal adviser whose fall from grace centers the action of

Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, and Jane Shore, title character of Nicholas Rowe's tragedy of 1714.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Lines 44–45 in William Collins's "Ode to Fear" (1746), slightly misquoted. The speaker of this poem anticipates the Aikins in marveling over the allure of fear and its potency as a source of art.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Quoting lines 119 and 109–10 of Milton's poem on the delights of studious melancholy. The story of Cambuscan was left half told in Chaucer's unfinished *Squire's Tale*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Alluding to a comic scene of force-feeding in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (5.1.36–60).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Or *auto-da-fé*; the form of execution that the Spanish Inquisition inflicted on heretics: the condemned were burned alive. The brutality of the public torture and execution in 1757 of Robert-François Damiens, the would-be assassin of Louis XV of France, was commented on across Europe.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Tobias Smollett's 1753 novel of villainy and picaresque adventure.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, wolds: open, elevated ground.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The fragment ends here.[Return to reference 9](#)

## ANN RADCLIFFE

The “Great Enchantress,” Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823) published five novels between 1789 and 1797 and a sixth posthumously in 1826, most of them tremendously popular and influential on other writers for long afterward. She shunned fame and lived in seclusion; so little was known of her that, seeking to explain the long interval between *The Italian* in 1797 and *Gaston de Blondville* in 1826, contemporaries gossiped that Radcliffe had at last gone mad from too much imagining and had spent her final decades confined in an asylum. The rumor was without basis, but the fate it assigned to Radcliffe is the fate most feared by her heroines, who cling valiantly to reason, but who are plunged into worlds of nightmarish mystery where nothing is as it seems and where reason, at least initially, does not get them very far. A Radcliffean heroine, like Radcliffe’s reader, is kept on the rack of suspense by a succession of inexplicable sights and sounds that tempt her to believe that supernatural events really do happen. The ancient castle in which she is confined, the site of these mysteries, is often located in some wilderness that the forces of law have abandoned and that has become the haunt of mercenary soldiers and picaresque bandits. For all its strangeness, however, this place frequently turns out to be a version of the heroine’s long-lost home, just as her tyrannical persecutors turn out to be closely allied with the fathers, uncles, and priests who are supposed to be a young lady’s protectors.

The first extract is taken from Radcliffe’s third novel, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791). In this episode, later remembered by Jane Austen as she recounted the story of the first eventful night that Catherine Morland spends as a guest at Northanger Abbey, the orphaned Adeline sets out, detectivelike, to solve a mystery. The second extract is from Radcliffe’s masterpiece, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), one of her signature pieces of dreamy landscape description, representing Emily St. Aubert’s reactions as she and her



villainous guardian Montoni approach his castle high in the Italian Appenines.

## ***From* The Romance of the Forest**

## **From *Chapter 8***

Adeline retired early to her room, which adjoined on one side to Madame La Motte's, and on the other to the closet formerly mentioned. It was spacious and lofty, and what little furniture it contained was falling to decay; but, perhaps, the present tone of her spirits might contribute more than these circumstances to give that air of melancholy which seemed to reign in it. She was unwilling to go to bed, lest the dreams that had lately pursued her should return; and determined to sit up till she found herself oppressed by sleep, when it was probable her rest would be profound. She placed the light on a small table, and, taking a book, continued to read for above an hour, till her mind refused any longer to abstract itself from its own cares, and she sat for some time leaning pensively on her arm.

The wind was high, and as it whistled through the desolate apartment, and shook the feeble doors, she often started, and sometimes even thought she heard sighs between the pauses of the gust; but she checked these illusions, which the hour of the night and her own melancholy imagination conspired to raise. As she sat musing, her eyes fixed on the opposite wall, she perceived the arras, with which the room was hung, wave backwards and forwards; she continued to observe it for some minutes, and then rose to examine it farther. It was moved by the wind; and she blushed at the momentary fear it had excited: but she observed that the tapestry was more strongly agitated in one particular place than elsewhere, and a noise that seemed something more than that of the wind issued thence. The old bedstead, which La Motte had found in this apartment, had been removed to accommodate Adeline, and it was behind the place where this had stood that the wind seemed to rush with particular force: curiosity prompted her to examine still farther; she felt about the tapestry, and perceiving the wall behind shake under her hand, she lifted the arras, and discovered a small door, whose loosened hinges admitted the wind, and occasioned the noise she had heard.

The door was held only by a bolt, having undrawn which, and brought the light, she descended by a few steps into another chamber: she instantly remembered her dreams. The chamber was not much like that in which she had seen the dying Chevalier, and afterwards the bier; but it gave her a confused remembrance of one through which she had passed. Holding up the light to examine it more fully, she was convinced by its structure that it was part of the ancient foundation. A shattered casement, placed high from the floor, seemed to be the only opening to admit light. She observed a door on the opposite side of the apartment; and after some moments of hesitation, gained courage, and determined to pursue the inquiry. "A mystery seems to hang over these chambers," said she, "which it is, perhaps, my lot to develope;<sup>1</sup> I will, at least, see to what that door leads."

She stepped forward, and having unclosed it, proceeded with faltering steps along a suite of apartments resembling the first in style and condition, and terminating in one exactly like that where her dream had represented the dying person; the remembrance struck so forcibly upon her imagination that she was in danger of fainting; and looking round the room, almost expected to see the phantom of her dream.

Unable to quit the place, she sat down on some old lumber<sup>2</sup> to recover herself, while her spirits were nearly overcome by a superstitious dread, such as she had never felt before. She wondered to what part of the abbey these chambers belonged, and that they had so long escaped detection. The casements were all too high to afford any information from without. When she was sufficiently composed to consider the direction of the rooms, and the situation of the abbey, there appeared not a doubt that they formed an interior part of the original building.

As these reflections passed over her mind, a sudden gleam of moonlight fell upon some object without the casement. Being now sufficiently composed to wish to pursue the inquiry, and believing this object might afford her some means of learning the situation of these rooms, she combated her remaining terrors, and, in order to

distinguish it more clearly, removed the light to an outer chamber; but before she could return, a heavy cloud was driven over the face of the moon, and all without was perfectly dark: she stood for some moments waiting a returning gleam, but the obscurity continued. As she went softly back for the light, her foot stumbled over something on the floor, and while she stooped to examine it, the moon again shone, so that she could distinguish, through the casement, the eastern towers of the abbey. This discovery confirmed her former conjectures concerning the interior situation of these apartments. The obscurity of the place prevented her discovering what it was that had impeded her steps, but having brought the light forward, she perceived on the floor an old dagger: with a trembling hand she took it up, and upon a closer view perceived that it was spotted and stained with rust.

Shocked and surprised, she looked round the room for some object that might confirm or destroy the dreadful suspicion which now rushed upon her mind; but she saw only a great chair, with broken arms, that stood in one corner of the room, and a table in a condition equally shattered, except that in another part lay a confused heap of things, which appeared to be old lumber. She went up to it, and perceived a broken bedstead, with some decayed remnants of furniture, covered with dust and cobwebs, and which seemed, indeed, as if they had not been moved for many years. Desirous, however, of examining farther, she attempted to raise what appeared to have been part of the bedstead, but it slipped from her hand, and, rolling to the floor, brought with it some of the remaining lumber. Adeline started aside and saved herself, and when the noise it made had ceased, she heard a small rustling sound, and as she was about to leave the chamber, saw something falling gently among the lumber.

It was a small roll of paper, tied with a string, and covered with dust. Adeline took it up, and on opening it perceived an handwriting. She attempted to read it, but the part of the manuscript she looked at was so much obliterated that she found this difficult, though what

few words were legible impressed her with curiosity and terror, and induced her to return immediately to her chamber.

1791

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Unfold, reveal.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Disused furniture and the like.[Return to reference 2](#)

## ***From The Mysteries of Udolpho***

## **From *Volume 2, Chapter 5***

Towards the close of day, the road wound into a deep valley. Mountains, whose shaggy steeps appeared to be inaccessible, almost surrounded it. To the east, a vista opened, that exhibited the Apennines in their darkest horrors; and the long perspective of retiring summits, rising over each other, their ridges clothed with pines, exhibited a stronger image of grandeur, than any that Emily had yet seen. The sun had just sunk below the top of the mountains she was descending, whose long shadow stretched athwart the valley, but his sloping rays, shooting through an opening of the cliffs, touched with a yellow gleam the summits of the forest, that hung upon the opposite steeps, and streamed in full splendour upon the towers and battlements of a castle, that spread its extensive ramparts along the brow of a precipice above. The splendour of these illumined objects was heightened by the contrasted shade, which involved the valley below.

"There," said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, "is Udolpho."

Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni's; for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object. As she gazed, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. From those too, the rays soon faded, and the whole edifice was invested with the solemn duskiness of evening. Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend.



The extent and darkness of these tall woods awakened terrific images in her mind, and she almost expected to see banditti start up from under the trees. At length, the carriages emerged upon a heathy rock, and, soon after, reached the castle gates, where the deep tone of the portal bell, which was struck upon to give notice of their arrival, increased the fearful emotions that had assailed Emily. While they waited till the servant within should come to open the gates, she anxiously surveyed the edifice: but the gloom that overspread it allowed her to distinguish little more than a part of its outline, with the massy walls of the ramparts, and to know that it was vast, ancient and dreary. From the parts she saw, she judged of the heavy strength and extent of the whole. The gateway before her, leading into the courts, was of gigantic size, and was defended by two round towers, crowned by overhanging turrets, embattled, where instead of banners, now waved long grass and wild plants, that had taken root among the mouldering stones, and which seemed to sigh, as the breeze rolled past, over the desolation around them. The towers were united by a curtain, pierced and embattled also, below which appeared the pointed arch of an huge portcullis, surmounting the gates: from these, the walls of the ramparts extended to other towers, overlooking the precipice, whose shattered outline, appearing on a gleam that lingered in the west, told of the ravages of war.—Beyond these all was lost in the obscurity of evening.

While Emily gazed with awe upon the scene, footsteps were heard within the gates, and the undrawing of the bolts; after which an ancient servant of the castle appeared, forcing back the huge folds of the portal, to admit his lord. As the carriage-wheels rolled heavily under the portcullis, Emily's heart sunk, and she seemed as if she was going into her prison; the gloomy court into which she passed served to confirm the idea, and her imagination, ever awake to circumstance, suggested even more terrors than her reason could justify.

## MATTHEW GREGORY LEWIS

Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*, published in 1796 when the author was twenty, is the most gory of the Gothic novels and one of the most vividly written (a combination guaranteed to produce a bestseller). Lewis (1775–1818) appears to have been alarmed by the scandal that erupted when his authorship was revealed, but not so rattled as to alter his literary course. He went on to compose Gothic dramas for the stage and, finding new uses for the language skills honed during the education that was meant to have prepared him for a diplomatic career, played a major part in introducing German tales of terror to England.

In *The Monk* Ambrosio, abbot of a monastery in Madrid, goes from a pinnacle of self-satisfied saintliness to become one of the most depraved villains in all fiction, both an incestuous rapist and matricidal murderer. After being seduced by Matilda, a female demon who has entered his monastery disguised as a male novice named Rosario, Ambrosio, with the help of a talisman that Matilda provides, plots the rape of one of his penitents, Antonia. Within *The Monk* mob violence competes with Ambrosio's bloodlust as a source for horror, suggesting how Gothic stories, even when set in distant pasts and places, may have allowed the readers and writers of the 1790s to work through timely anxieties about the power of crowds and the threat of revolution.

In the first extract here, Ambrosio exults in private after having delivered a spellbinding sermon to a packed church in Madrid. The second extract recounts his assault on Antonia and the discovery by her mother, Elvira, of the young woman's peril.

## ***From The Monk***

## **From *Chapter 2***

The monks having attended their abbot to the door of his cell, he dismissed them with an air of conscious superiority, in which humility's semblance combated with the reality of pride.

He was no sooner alone, than he gave free loose to the indulgence of his vanity. When he remembered the enthusiasm which his discourse had excited, his heart swelled with rapture, and his imagination presented him with splendid visions of aggrandizement. He looked round him with exultation; and pride told him loudly that he was superior to the rest of his fellow-creatures.

"Who," thought he, "who but myself has passed the ordeal of youth, yet sees no single stain upon his conscience? Who else has subdued the violence of strong passions and an impetuous temperament, and submitted even from the dawn of life to voluntary retirement? I seek for such a man in vain. I see no one but myself possessed of such resolution. Religion cannot boast Ambrosio's equal! How powerful an effect did my discourse produce upon its auditors! How they crowded round me! How they loaded me with benedictions, and pronounced me the sole uncorrupted pillar of the church! What then now is left for me to do? Nothing, but to watch as carefully over the conduct of my brethren, as I have hitherto watched over my own. Yet hold! May I not be tempted from those paths which till now I have pursued without one moment's wandering? Am I not a man whose nature is frail and prone to error? I must now abandon the solitude of my retreat; the fairest and noblest dames of Madrid continually present themselves at the abbey, and will use no other confessor. I must accustom my eyes to objects of temptation, and expose myself to the seduction of luxury and desire. Should I meet in that world which I am constrained to enter, some lovely female—lovely as you—Madona—!"

As he said this, he fixed his eyes upon a picture of the Virgin, which was suspended opposite to him: this for two years had been the object of his increasing wonder and adoration. He paused, and gazed upon it with delight.

"What beauty in that countenance!" he continued after a silence of some minutes; "how graceful is the turn of that head! what sweetness, yet what majesty in her divine eyes! how softly her cheek reclines upon her hand! Can the rose vie with the blush of that cheek? can the lily rival the whiteness of that hand? Oh! if such a creature existed, and existed but for me! were I permitted to twine round my fingers those golden ringlets, and press with my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom! gracious God, should I then resist the temptation? Should I not barter for a single embrace the reward of my sufferings for thirty years? Should I not abandon——Fool that I am! Whither do I suffer my admiration of this picture to hurry me? Away, impure ideas! Let me remember that woman is for ever lost to me. Never was mortal formed so perfect as this picture. But even did such exist, the trial might be too mighty for a common virtue; but Ambrosio's is proof against temptation. Temptation, did I say? To me it would be none. What charms me, when ideal and considered as a superior being, would disgust me, become woman and tainted with all the failings of mortality. It is not the woman's beauty that fills me with such enthusiasm: it is the painter's skill that I admire; it is the Divinity that I adore. Are not the passions dead in my bosom? have I not freed myself from the frailty of mankind? Fear not, Ambrosio! Take confidence in the strength of your virtue. Enter boldly into the world, to whose failings you are superior; reflect that you are now exempted from humanity's defects, and defy all the arts of the spirits of darkness. They shall know you for what you are!"

Here his reverie was interrupted by three soft knocks at the door of his cell. With difficulty did the abbot awake from his delirium. The knocking was repeated.

"Who is there?" said Ambrosio at length.

"It is only Rosario," replied a gentle voice.

### **From *Chapter 8***

It was almost two o'clock before the lustful monk ventured to bend his steps towards Antonia's dwelling. It has been already mentioned that the abbey was at no great distance from the strada di San Iago. He reached the house unobserved. Here he stopped, and hesitated for a moment. He reflected on the enormity of the crime, the consequences of a discovery, and the probability, after what had passed, of Elvira's suspecting him to be her daughter's ravisher. On the other hand it was suggested that she could do no more than suspect; that no proofs of his guilt could be produced; that it would seem impossible for the rape to have been committed without Antonia's knowing when, where, or by whom; and finally, he believed that his fame was too firmly established to be shaken by the unsupported accusations of two unknown women. This latter argument was perfectly false. He knew not how uncertain is the air of popular applause, and that a moment suffices to make him to-day the detestation of the world, who yesterday was its idol. The result of the monk's deliberations was that he should proceed in his enterprise. He ascended the steps leading to the house. No sooner did he touch the door with the silver myrtle than it flew open, and presented him with a free passage. He entered, and the door closed after him of its own accord.

Guided by the moon-beams, he proceeded up the stair-case with slow and cautious steps. He looked round him every moment with apprehension and anxiety. He saw a spy in every shadow, and heard a voice in every murmur of the night-breeze. Consciousness of the guilty business on which he was employed appalled his heart, and rendered it more timid than a woman's. Yet still he proceeded. He reached the door of Antonia's chamber. He stopped, and listened. All was hushed within. The total silence persuaded him that his intended victim was retired to rest, and he ventured to lift up the latch. The door was fastened, and resisted his efforts. But no sooner was it touched by the talisman than the bolt flew back. The ravisher stepped on, and found himself in the chamber where slept the

innocent girl, unconscious how dangerous a visitor was drawing near her couch. The door closed after him, and the bolt shot again into its fastening.

Ambrosio advanced with precaution. He took care that not a board should creak under his foot, and held in his breath as he approached the bed. His first attention was to perform the magic ceremony, as Matilda had charged him: he breathed thrice upon the silver myrtle, pronounced over it Antonia's name, and laid it upon her pillow. The effects which it had already produced permitted not his doubting its success in prolonging the slumbers of his devoted mistress. No sooner was the enchantment performed than he considered her to be absolutely in his power, and his eyes flashed with lust and impatience. He now ventured to cast a glance upon the sleeping beauty. A single lamp, burning before the statue of St. Rosalia, shed a faint light through the room, and permitted him to examine all the charms of the lovely object before him. The heat of the weather had obliged her to throw off part of the bed-clothes. Those which still covered her Ambrosio's insolent hand hastened to remove. She lay with her cheek reclining upon one ivory arm: the other rested on the side of the bed with graceful indolence. A few tresses of her hair had escaped from beneath the muslin which confined the rest, and fell carelessly over her bosom, as it heaved with slow and regular suspiration. The warm air had spread her cheek with a higher colour than usual. A smile inexpressibly sweet played round her ripe and coral lips, from which every now and then escaped a gentle sigh, or an half-pronounced sentence. An air of enchanting innocence and candour pervaded her whole form; and there was a sort of modesty in her very nakedness, which added fresh stings to the desires of the lustful monk.

He remained for some moments devouring those charms with his eyes which soon were to be subjected to his ill-regulated passions. Her mouth half-opened seem to solicit a kiss: he bent over her: he joined his lips to hers, and drew in the fragrance of her breath with rapture. This momentary pleasure increased his longing for still greater. His desires were raised to that frantic height by which brutes are agitated. He resolved not to delay for one instant longer the

accomplishment of his wishes, and hastily proceeded to tear off those garments which impeded the gratification of his lust.

"Gracious God!" exclaimed a voice behind him: "Am I not deceived? Is not this an illusion?"

Terror, confusion, and disappointment accompanied these words, as they struck Ambrosio's hearing. He started, and turned towards it. Elvira stood at the door of the chamber, and regarded the monk with looks of surprise and detestation.

A frightful dream had represented to her Antonia on the verge of a precipice. She saw her trembling on the brink: every moment seemed to threaten her fall, and she heard her exclaim with shrieks, "Save me, mother! save me!—Yet a moment, and it will be too late." Elvira woke in terror. The vision had made too strong an impression upon her mind to permit her resting till assured of her daughter's safety. She hastily started from her bed, threw on a loose nightgown, and, passing through the closet in which slept the waiting-woman, reached Antonia's chamber just in time to rescue her from the grasp of the ravisher.

His shame and her amazement seemed to have petrified into statues both Elvira and the monk. They remained gazing upon each other in silence. The lady was the first to recover herself.

"It is no dream," she cried: "it is really Ambrosio who stands before me. It is the man whom Madrid esteems a saint that I find at this late hour near the couch of my unhappy child. Monster of hypocrisy! I already suspected your designs, but forbore your accusation in pity to human frailty. Silence would now be criminal. The whole city shall be informed of your incontinence. I will unmask you, villain, and convince the church what a viper she cherishes in her bosom."

Pale and confused, the baffled culprit stood trembling before her. He would fain have extenuated his offence, but could find no apology for his conduct. He could produce nothing but broken sentences, and excuses which contradicted each other. Elvira was too justly incensed to grant the pardon which he requested. She protested that she would raise the neighbourhood, and make him an example to all



future hypocrites. Then hastening to the bed, she called to Antonia to wake; and finding that her voice had no effect, she took her arm, and raised her forcibly from the pillow. The charm operated too powerfully. Antonia remained insensible; and, on being released by her mother, sank back upon the pillow.

"This slumber cannot be natural," cried the amazed Elvira, whose indignation increased with every moment: "some mystery is concealed in it. But tremble, hypocrite! All your villainy shall soon be unravelled. Help! help!" she exclaimed aloud: "Within there! Flora! Flora!"

"Hear me for one moment, lady!" cried the monk, restored to himself by the urgency of the danger: "by all that is sacred and holy, I swear that your daughter's honour is still unviolated. Forgive my transgression! Spare me the shame of a discovery, and permit me to regain the abbey undisturbed. Grant me this request in mercy! I promise not only that Antonia shall be secure from me in future, but that the rest of my life shall prove—"

Elvira interrupted him abruptly.



**" Final Discovery . . . "** Frontispiece for a typical Gothic chapbook, the inexpensive form that Gothic fiction took as it became part of popular culture: *The Skeleton Lover: A Romantic Tale* (1830).

"Antonia secure from you? *I* will secure her. You shall betray no longer the confidence of parents. Your iniquity shall be unveiled to the public eye. All Madrid shall shudder at your perfidy, your hypocrisy, and incontinence. What ho! there! Flora! Flora! I say."

While she spoke thus, the remembrance of Agnes struck upon his mind. Thus had she sued to him for mercy, and thus had he refused her prayer! It was now his turn to suffer, and he could not but acknowledge that his punishment was just. In the mean while Elvira continued to call Flora to her assistance; but her voice was so choaked with passion, that the servant, who was buried in profound

slumber, was insensible to all her cries: Elvira dared not go towards the closet in which Flora slept, lest the monk should take that opportunity to escape. Such indeed was his intention: he trusted that, could he reach the abbey unobserved by any other than Elvira, her single testimony would not suffice to ruin a reputation so well established as his was in Madrid. With this idea he gathered up such garments as he had already thrown off, and hastened towards the door. Elvira was aware of his design: she followed him, and, ere he could draw back the bolt, seized him by the arm, and detained him.

"Attempt not to fly!" said she: "you quit not this room without witnesses of your guilt."

Ambrosio struggled in vain to disengage himself. Elvira quitted not her hold, but redoubled her cries for succour. The friar's danger grew more urgent. He expected every moment to hear people assembling at her voice; and, worked up to madness by the approach of ruin, he adopted a resolution equally desperate and savage. Turning round suddenly, with one hand he grasped Elvira's throat so as to prevent her continuing her clamour, and with the other, dashing her violently upon the ground, he dragged her towards the bed. Confused by this unexpected attack, she scarcely had power to strive at forcing herself from his grasp: while the monk, snatching the pillow from beneath her daughter's head, covering with it Elvira's face, and pressing his knee upon her stomach with all his strength, endeavoured to put an end to her existence. He succeeded but too well. Her natural strength increased by the excess of anguish, long did the sufferer struggle to disengage herself, but in vain. The monk continued to kneel upon her breast, witnessed without mercy the convulsive trembling of her limbs beneath him, and sustained with inhuman firmness the spectacle of her agonies, when soul and body were on the point of separating. Those agonies at length were over. She ceased to struggle for life. The monk took off the pillow, and gazed upon her. Her face was covered with a frightful blackness: her limbs moved no more: the blood was chilled in her veins: her heart had forgotten to beat; and her hands were stiff and frozen. Ambrosio beheld before him that

once noble and majestic form, now become a corpse,<sup>1</sup> cold, senseless, and disgusting.

This horrible act was no sooner perpetrated, than the friar beheld the enormity of his crime. A cold dew flowed over his limbs: his eyes closed: he staggered to a chair, and sank into it almost as lifeless as the unfortunate who lay extended at his feet. From this state he was roused by the necessity of flight, and the danger of being found in Antonia's apartment. He had no desire to profit by the execution of his crime. Antonia now appeared to him an object of disgust. A deadly cold had usurped the place of that warmth which glowed in his bosom. No ideas offered themselves to his mind but those of death and guilt, of present shame and future punishment. Agitated by remorse and fear, he prepared for flight: yet his terrors did not so completely master his recollection as to prevent his taking the precautions necessary for his safety. He replaced the pillow upon the bed, gathered up his garments, and, with the fatal talisman in his hand, bent his unsteady steps towards the door. Bewildered by fear, he fancied that his flight was opposed by legions of phantoms. Wherever he turned, the disfigured corpse seemed to lie in his passage, and it was long before he succeeded in reaching the door.

1795

1796

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Corpse. [Return to reference 1](#)

## SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Many elements in Coleridge's poetry—the account of the skeleton ship in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, for instance, or the atmosphere, setting, and fragmentary plot of witchery and seduction in *Christabel*—suggest how absorbing he found the novels of the “terrorist school.” His letters from the 1790s sometimes reveal him sitting up all night, trembling, he says, “like an aspen leaf” as he turns their pages. But elsewhere Coleridge's writings indicate how complex and ambivalent the Romantic poets' reaction to Gothic writing could be. As a first example we provide his scathing review, published in the *Critical Review* in February 1797, of *The Monk*. It should be noted that Coleridge's reaction to Matthew Lewis's novel is, for all its alarm, much more measured than those of most of his fellow critics.

## ***From Review of *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis***

The horrible and the preternatural have usually seized on the popular taste, at the rise and decline of literature. Most powerful stimulants, they can never be required except by the torpor of an unawakened, or the languor of an exhausted, appetite. The same phenomenon, therefore, which we hail as a favourable omen in the belles lettres<sup>1</sup> of Germany, impresses a degree of gloom in the compositions of our countrymen. We trust, however, that satiety will banish what good sense should have prevented; and that, wearied with fiends, incomprehensible characters, with shrieks, murders, and subterraneous dungeons, the public will learn, by the multitude of the manufacturers, with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured. But, cheaply as we estimate romances in general, we acknowledge, in the work before us, the offspring of no common genius. The tale is similar to that of Santon Barsista in the Guardian.<sup>2</sup> Ambrosio, a monk, surnamed the Man of Holiness, proud of his own undeviating rectitude, and severe to the faults of others, is successfully assailed by the tempter of mankind, and seduced to the perpetration of rape and murder, and finally precipitated into a contract in which he consigns his soul to everlasting perdition.

The larger part of the three volumes is occupied by the underplot, which, however, is skilfully and closely connected with the main story, and is subservient to its development. The tale of the bleeding nun is truly terrific; and we could not easily recollect a bolder or more happy conception than that of the burning cross on the forehead of the wandering Jew (a mysterious character, which, though copied as to its more prominent features from Schiller's incomprehensible Armenian,<sup>3</sup> does, nevertheless, display great vigour of fancy). But the character of Matilda, the chief agent in the

seduction of Antonio<sup>4</sup> appears to us to be the author's master-piece. It is, indeed, exquisitely imagined, and as exquisitely supported. The whole work is distinguished by the variety and impressiveness of its incidents; and the author everywhere discovers an imagination rich, powerful, and fervid. Such are the excellencies;—the errors and defects are more numerous, and (we are sorry to add) of greater importance.

All events are levelled into one common mass, and become almost equally probable, where the order of nature may be changed whenever the author's purposes demand it. No address is requisite to the accomplishment of any design; and no pleasure therefore can be received from the perception of *difficulty surmounted*. The writer may make us wonder, but he cannot surprise us. For the same reasons a romance is incapable of exemplifying a moral truth. No proud man, for instance, will be made less proud by being told that Lucifer once seduced a presumptuous monk. *Incredulus odit*.<sup>5</sup> Or even if, believing the story, he should deem his virtue less secure, he would yet acquire no lessons of prudence, no feelings of humility. Human prudence can oppose no sufficient shield to the power and cunning of supernatural beings; and the privilege of being proud might be fairly conceded to him who could rise superior to all earthly temptations, and whom the strength of the spiritual world alone would be adequate to overwhelm. So falling, he would fall with glory, and might reasonably welcome his defeat with the haughty emotions of a conqueror. As far, therefore, as the story is concerned, the praise which a romance can claim, is simply that of having given pleasure during its perusal; and so many are the calamities of life, that he who has done this, has not written uselessly. The children of sickness and of solitude shall thank him. To this praise, however, our author has not entitled himself. The sufferings which he describes are so frightful and intolerable, that we break with abruptness from the delusion, and indignantly suspect the man of a species of brutality, who could find a pleasure in wantonly imagining them; and the abominations which he portrays with no hurrying pencil, are such as the observation of character by no means demanded, such

as "no observation of character can justify, because no good man would willingly suffer them to pass, however transiently, through his own mind." The merit of a novelist is in proportion (not simply to the effect, but) to the *pleasurable* effect which he produces. Situations of torment, and images of naked horror, are easily conceived; and a writer in whose works they abound, deserves our gratitude almost equally with him who should drag us by way of sport through a military hospital, or force us to sit at the dissecting-table of a natural philosopher. To trace the nice<sup>6</sup> boundaries, beyond which terror and sympathy are deserted by the pleasurable emotions,—to reach those limits, yet never to pass them,—*hic labor, hic opus est.*<sup>7</sup> Figures that shock the imagination, and narratives that mangle the feelings, rarely discover *genius*, and always betray a low and vulgar *taste*. Nor has our author indicated less ignorance of the human heart in the management of the principal character. The wisdom and goodness of providence have ordered that the tendency of vicious actions to deprave the heart of the perpetrator, should diminish in proportion to the greatness of his temptations. Now, in addition to constitutional warmth and irresistible opportunity, the monk is impelled to incontinence by friendship, by compassion, by gratitude, by all that is amiable, and all that is estimable; yet in a few weeks after his first frailty, the man who had been described as possessing much general humanity, a keen and vigorous understanding, with habits of the most exalted piety, degenerates into an uglier fiend than the gloomy imagination of Dante would have ventured to picture. Again, the monk is described as feeling and acting under the influence of an appetite which could not co-exist with his other emotions. The romance-writer possesses an unlimited power over situations; but he must scrupulously make his characters act in congruity with them. Let him work *physical* wonders only, and we will be content to *dream* with him for a while; but the first *moral* miracle which he attempts, he disgusts and awakens us. Thus our judgment remains unoffended, when, announced by thunders and earthquakes, the spirit appears to Ambrosio involved in blue fires that increase the cold of the cavern; and we acquiesce in the power of the silver



myrtle which made gates and doors fly open at its touch, and charmed every eye into sleep. But when a mortal, fresh from the impression of that terrible appearance, and in the act of evincing for the first time the witching force of this myrtle, is represented as being at the same moment agitated by so fleeting an appetite as that of lust, our own feelings convince us that this is not improbable, but impossible; not preternatural, but contrary to nature. The extent of the powers that may exist, we can never ascertain; and therefore we feel no great difficulty in yielding a temporary belief to any, the strangest, situation of *things*. But that situation once conceived, how beings like ourselves would feel and act in it, our own feelings sufficiently instruct us; and we instantly reject the clumsy fiction that does not harmonise with them. These are the two *principal* mistakes in *judgment*, which the author has fallen into; but we cannot wholly pass over the frequent incongruity of his style with his subjects. It is gaudy where it should have been severely simple; and too often the mind is offended by phrases the most trite and colloquial, where it demands and had expected a sternness and solemnity of diction.

A more grievous fault remains, a fault for which no literary excellence can atone, a fault which all other excellence does but aggravate, as adding subtlety to a poison by the elegance of its preparation. Mildness of censure would here be criminally misplaced, and silence would make us accomplices. Not without reluctance then, but in full conviction that we are performing a duty, we declare it to be our opinion, that the Monk is a romance, which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale. The temptations of Ambrosio are described with a libidinous minuteness, which, we sincerely hope, will receive its best and only adequate censure from the offended conscience of the author himself. The shameless harlotry of Matilda, and the trembling innocence of Antonia, are seized with equal avidity, as vehicles of the most voluptuous images; and though the tale is indeed a tale of horror, yet the most painful impression which the work left on our minds was that of great acquirements and splendid genius employed to furnish a *mormo*<sup>8</sup> for children, a poison for youth, and a

provocative for the debauchee. Tales of enchantments and witchcraft can never be *useful*: our author has contrived to make them *pernicious*, by blending, with an irreverent negligence, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition.

1797

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Literature.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An Eastern tale published in 1713 and acknowledged by Lewis as one of his sources.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The mysterious villain of Friedrich Schiller's *The Ghost-seer* (English translation 1795).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Coleridge's mistake for Ambrosio.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: "To disbelieve is to dislike": Horace, *Art of Poetry* 1.188.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Subtle.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: This is the effort, this is the work (Latin).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Bogeyman, object of needless dread.[Return to reference 8](#)

## ***From Biographia Literaria***

### From *Chapter 3*<sup>1</sup>

For as to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time*, with the name of *reading*. Call it rather a sort of beggarly daydreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness and a little mawkish sensibility; while the whole *materiel* and imagery of the doze is supplied *ab extra*<sup>2</sup> by a sort of mental *camera obscura*<sup>3</sup> manufactured at the printing office, which *pro tempore*<sup>4</sup> fixes, reflects and transmits the moving phantasms of one man's delirium, so as to people the barrenness of an hundred other brains afflicted with the same trance or suspension of all common sense and all definite purpose. We should therefore transfer this species of *amusement* (if indeed those can be said to retire *a musis*,<sup>5</sup> who were never in their company, or relaxation be attributable to those, whose bows are never bent) from the genus, *reading*, to that comprehensive class characterized by the power of reconciling the two contrary yet co-existing propensities of human nature, namely indulgence of sloth, and hatred of vacancy. In addition to novels and tales of chivalry in prose or rhyme (by which last I mean neither rhythm nor metre) this genus comprises as its species, gaming; swinging or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking; tête-à-tête quarrels after dinner between husband and wife; conning word by word all the advertisements of the *Daily Advertiser* in a public house on a rainy day, etc. etc. etc.

1815

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This paragraph makes up the first footnote to the third chapter of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, the hybrid book in which he blended autobiography with philosophical speculations and favorite anecdotes. In the body of his text, Coleridge refers to the frequency with which his name has been before the reading public; the footnote (the text given here) then goes on

to identify the sort of people who for him do not count as legitimate members of that public.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: From the outside (Latin).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A device (forerunner of the modern camera) creating a special optical effect: light passes through a pinhole into a darkened room and creates an inverted image of the world beyond the walls.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: For the time being (Latin).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A pun linking “amusement” and *a musis*, “away from the Muses.”[Return to reference 5](#)

# **WILLIAM WORDSWORTH**

## **1770–1850**

William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth in West Cumberland, just on the northern fringe of the English Lake District. His mother died shortly before he turned eight; the following year, the boy was sent to school at Hawkshead, near Esthwaite lake, in the heart of that sparsely populated region that he and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were to transform into one of the poetic centers of England. William and his three brothers boarded in the cottage of Ann Tyson, who gave the boys simple comfort, ample affection, and freedom to roam the countryside at will. A vigorous, unruly, and sometimes moody boy, William spent his free days and occasionally "half the night" in the sports and rambles described in the first two books of his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, "drinking in" (to use one of his favorite metaphors) the natural sights and sounds, and getting to know the cottagers, shepherds, and solitary wanderers who moved through his imagination into his later poetry. He also found time to read voraciously in the books owned by his young headmaster, William Taylor, who encouraged him in his inclination to poetry.

John Wordsworth, the poet's father, died suddenly when William was thirteen, leaving to his five children mainly the substantial sum owed him by Lord Lonsdale, whom he had served as attorney and as steward of the huge Lonsdale estate. This harsh nobleman had yet to pay the debt when he died in 1802. Wordsworth was nevertheless

able in 1787 to enter St. John's College, Cambridge University, where four years later he took his degree without distinction.

During the summer vacation of his third year at Cambridge (1790), Wordsworth and his closest college friend, the Welshman Robert Jones, journeyed on foot through France and the Alps (described in *The Prelude* 6) at the time when the French were joyously celebrating the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Upon completing his course at Cambridge, Wordsworth spent four months in London, set off on another walking tour with Robert Jones through Wales (the time of the memorable ascent of Mount Snowdon in *The Prelude* 13), and then went back alone to France to master the language and qualify as a traveling tutor.

During his year in France (November 1791 to December 1792), Wordsworth became a fervent supporter of the French Revolution—which seemed to him and many others to promise a “glorious renovation” of society—and he fell in love with Annette Vallon, the daughter of a French surgeon at Blois. The two planned to marry, despite their differences in religion and political inclinations (Annette belonged to an old Catholic family whose sympathies were Royalist). But almost immediately after their daughter, Caroline, was born, lack of money forced Wordsworth to return to England. The outbreak of war made it impossible for him to rejoin Annette and Caroline. Wordsworth's guilt over this abandonment, his divided loyalties between England and France, and his gradual disillusion with the course of the Revolution brought him—according to his account in *The Prelude* 10 and 11—to the verge of an emotional breakdown, when, “sick, wearied out with contrarieties,” he “yielded up moral questions in despair.” His suffering, his near-collapse, and the successful effort, after his break with his past, to reestablish “a saving intercourse with my true self,” are the experiences that underlie many of his greatest poems.

At this critical point, a friend died and left Wordsworth a sum of money just sufficient to enable him to live by his poetry. In 1795 he settled in a rent-free house at Racedown, Dorsetshire, with his beloved sister, Dorothy, who now began her long career as

confidante, inspirer, and secretary. At that same time Wordsworth met Coleridge. Two years later he moved to Alfoxden House, Somersetshire, to be near Coleridge, who lived a few miles away at Nether Stowey. Here he entered at the age of twenty-seven on the delayed springtime of his poetic career.

Even while he had been an undergraduate at Cambridge, Coleridge claimed that he had detected signs of genius in Wordsworth's rather conventional poem about his tour in the Alps, *Descriptive Sketches*, published in 1793. Now he hailed Wordsworth unreservedly as "the best poet of the age." The two men met almost daily, talked for hours about poetry, and wrote prolifically. So close was their association that we find the same phrases occurring in poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as in the remarkable journals that Dorothy kept at the time; the two poets collaborated in some writings and freely traded thoughts and passages for others; and Coleridge even undertook to complete a few poems that Wordsworth had left unfinished. This close partnership, along with the hospitality the two households offered to another young radical writer, John Thelwall, aroused the paranoia of people in the neighborhood. Already fearful of a military invasion by France, they became convinced that Wordsworth and Coleridge were political plotters, not poets. The government sent spies to investigate, and the Wordsworths lost their lease.

Although brought to this abrupt end, that short period of collaboration resulted in one of the most important books of the era, *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*, published anonymously in 1798. This short volume opened with Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and included three other poems by Coleridge, some lyrics in which Wordsworth celebrated the experience of nature, and a number of verse anecdotes drawn from the lives of the rural poor. (The verse forms and the subject matter of this last set of poems—which includes "Simon Lee," "We Are Seven," and "The Thorn"—make evident the debt, announced in the very title of *Lyrical Ballads*, that Wordsworth's and Coleridge's book owed to the folk ballads that were being transcribed and anthologized in the later eighteenth



century by collectors such as Thomas Percy and Robert Burns.) The book closed with Wordsworth's great descriptive and meditative poem in blank verse, "Tintern Abbey." This poem inaugurated what modern critics call Wordsworth's "myth of nature": his presentation of the "growth" of his mind to maturity, a process unfolding through the interaction between the inner world of the mind and the shaping force of external Nature.

William Hazlitt said that when he heard Coleridge read some of the newly written poems of *Lyrical Ballads* aloud, "the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me," with something of the effect "that arises from the turning up of the fresh soil, or of the first welcome breath of spring." The reviewers were less enthusiastic, warning that, because of their simple language and subject matter, poems such as "Simon Lee" risked "vulgarity" or silliness. Nevertheless *Lyrical Ballads* sold out in two years, and Wordsworth published under his own name a new edition, dated 1800, to which he added a second volume of poems. In his famous Preface to this edition, planned in close consultation with Coleridge, Wordsworth outlined a critical program that provided a retroactive rationale for the "experiments" the poems represented.

Late in 1799 William and Dorothy moved back permanently to their native lakes, settling at Grasmere in the little house later named Dove Cottage. Coleridge, following them, rented at Keswick, thirteen miles away. In 1802 Wordsworth finally came into his father's inheritance and, after an amicable settlement with Annette Vallon, married Mary Hutchinson, whom he had known since childhood. His life after that time had many sorrows: the drowning in 1805 of his favorite brother, John, a sea captain; the deaths in 1812 of two of his and Mary's five children; a growing rift with Coleridge, culminating in a bitter quarrel (1810) from which they were not completely reconciled for almost two decades; and, from the 1830s on, Dorothy's physical and mental illness. Over these years Wordsworth became, nonetheless, increasingly prosperous and famous. He also displayed a political and religious conservatism that disappointed readers who, like Hazlitt, had interpreted his early work

as the expression of a “levelling Muse” that promoted democratic change. In 1813 a government sinecure, the position of stamp distributor (that is, revenue collector) for Westmorland, was bestowed on him—concrete evidence of his recognition as a national poet and of the alteration in the government’s perception of his politics. Gradually, Wordsworth’s residences, as he moved into more and more comfortable quarters, became standard stops for sightseers touring the Lakes. By 1843 he was poet laureate of Great Britain. He died in 1850 at the age of eighty. Only then did his executors publish his masterpiece, *The Prelude*, or *Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, the epic poem of “Self-biography” (in Coleridge’s phrase) that he had written in two parts in 1799, expanded to its full length in 1805, and then continued to revise almost to the last decade of his long life.

Most of Wordsworth’s greatest poetry had been written by 1807, when he published *Poems, in Two Volumes*. After *The Excursion* (1814) and the first collected edition of his poems (1815), although he continued to write prolifically and to work on the revisions for additional collected editions, his powers appeared to decline. The causes of that decline have been much debated. One seems to be inherent in the very nature of his writing. Wordsworth is above all the poet of the remembrance—also the reinterpretation—of things past. He frequently presents his poetry as the outgrowth of occasions on which objects or events in the present trigger a sudden renewal of feelings that he has experienced in youth, often without then realizing their import. In his prose portrait of Wordsworth for *The Spirit of the Age* William Hazlitt noticed this: for Wordsworth, he observed, there “is no image so insignificant that it has not in some mood or other found the way into his heart: no sound that does not awaken the memory of other years.” But the memory of one’s early emotional experience is not an inexhaustible resource for poetry, as Wordsworth recognized almost from the start of his career. In book 11 of the 1805 version of *The Prelude* he already seems to be entertaining a premonition of future loss, in the lines that describe the recurrence of “spots of time” from his memories of childhood:

The days gone by  
Come back upon me from the dawn almost  
Of life: the hiding-places of my power  
Seem open; I approach and then they close;  
I see by glimpses now, when age comes on  
May scarcely see at all.

The simple (maybe even prosy) lines, on the perplexities of memory, on the mystery that the self poses for the self, and on the sorrows and losses brought by time, announce an imminent imaginative failure. At the same time, contrariwise, they also suggest the reason Hazlitt in the same essay would declare Wordsworth's poetry preeminent among that of the living poets: "he has communicated interest and dignity to the primal movements of the heart of man."

***FROM* LYRICAL BALLADS**

# Goody Blake and Harry Gill

## *A True Story*

Oh! what's the matter? what's the matter?  
What is't that ails young Harry Gill?  
That evermore his teeth they chatter,  
Chatter, chatter, chatter still.  
5 Of waistcoats Harry has no lack,  
Good duffle grey, and flannel fine;  
He has a blanket on his back,  
And coats enough to smother nine.

In March, December, and in July,  
'Tis all the same with Harry Gill;  
10 The neighbours tell, and tell you truly,  
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.  
At night, at morning, and at noon,  
'Tis all the same with Harry Gill;  
15 Beneath the sun, beneath the moon,  
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.

Young Harry was a lusty drover,  
And who so stout of limb as he?  
His cheeks were red as ruddy clover,  
His voice was like the voice of three.  
20 Auld Goody<sup>1</sup> Blake was old and poor,  
Ill fed she was, and thinly clad;  
And any man who pass'd her door,  
Might see how poor a hut she had,

25 All day she spun in her poor dwelling,  
And then her three hours' work at night!

Alas! 'twas hardly worth the telling,  
It would not pay for candle-light.  
—This woman dwelt in Dorsetshire,  
Her hut was on a cold hill-side,  
30 And in that country coals are dear,  
For they come far by wind and tide.

By the same fire to boil their pottage,  
Two poor old dames, as I have known,  
Will often live in one small cottage,  
35 But she, poor woman, dwelt alone.  
'Twas well enough when summer came,  
The long, warm, lightsome summer-day,  
Then at her door the *canty*<sup>o</sup> dame  
Would sit, as any linnet gay.  
40

But when the ice our streams did fether,  
Oh! then how her old bones would shake!  
You would have said, if you had met her,  
'Twas a hard time for Goody Blake.  
Her evenings then were dull and dead;  
45 Sad case it was, as you may think,  
For very cold to go to bed,  
And then for cold not sleep a wink.

Oh joy for her! when e'er in winter  
The winds at night had made a rout,  
50 And scatter'd many a lusty splinter,  
And many a rotten bough about.  
Yet never had she, well or sick,  
As every man who knew her says,  
A pile before-hand, wood or stick,  
55 Enough to warm her for three days.

Now, when the frost was past enduring,  
And made her poor old bones to ache,

60        Could any thing be more alluring,  
          Than an old hedge to Goody Blake?  
          And now and then, it must be said,  
          When her old bones were cold and chill,  
          She left her fire, or left her bed,  
          To seek the hedge of Harry Gill.

65        Now Harry he had long suspected  
          This trespass of old Goody Blake,  
          And vow'd that she should be detected,  
          And he on her would vengeance take.  
          And oft from his warm fire he'd go,  
70        And to the fields his road would take,  
          And there, at night, in frost and snow,  
          He watch'd to seize old Goody Blake.

75        And once, behind a rick of barley,  
          Thus looking out did Harry stand;  
          The moon was full and shining clearly,  
          And crisp with frost the stubble-land.  
          —He hears a noise—he's all awake—  
          Again?—on tip-toe down the hill  
          He softly creeps—'Tis Goody Blake,  
80        She's at the hedge of Harry Gill.

85        Right glad was he when he beheld her:  
          Stick after stick did Goody pull,  
          He stood behind a bush of elder,  
          Till she had filled her apron full.  
          When with her load she turned about,  
          The bye-road back again to take,  
          He started forward with a shout,  
          And sprang upon poor Goody Blake.

          And fiercely by the arm he took her,  
          And by the arm he held her fast,

90 And fiercely by the arm he shook her,  
And cried, "I've caught you then at last!"  
Then Goody, who had nothing said,  
Her bundle from her lap let fall;  
95 And kneeling on the sticks, she pray'd  
To God that is the judge of all.

She pray'd, her wither'd hand uprearing,  
While Harry held her by the arm—  
"God! who art never out of hearing,  
O may he never more be warm!"  
100 The cold, cold moon above her head,  
Thus on her knees did Goody pray,  
Young Harry heard what she had said,  
And icy-cold he turned away.

He went complaining all the morrow  
105 That he was cold and very chill:  
His face was gloom, his heart was sorrow,  
Alas! that day for Harry Gill!  
That day he wore a riding-coat,  
But not a whit the warmer he:  
110 Another was on Thursday brought,  
And ere the Sabbath he had three.

'Twas all in vain, a useless matter,  
And blankets were about him pinn'd;  
Yet still his jaws and teeth they clatter,  
115 Like a loose casement in the wind.  
And Harry's flesh it fell away;  
And all who see him say 'tis plain,  
That, live as long as live he may,  
He never will be warm again.

120 No word to any man he utters,  
A-bed or up, to young or old;



125 But ever to himself he mutters,  
"Poor Harry Gill is very cold."  
A-bed or up, by night or day;  
His teeth they chatter, chatter still.  
Now think, ye farmers all, I pray,  
Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill.<sup>2</sup>

Mar. 1798

1798

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Term of civility applied to a woman in humble life. "Auld": old.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In the version of a Preface Wordsworth wrote for *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 he remarked that through this tale he aimed "to draw attention to the truth that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous. The truth is an important one; the fact (for it is a *fact*) is a valuable illustration of it." Wordsworth found this fact when reading the latest speculations in psychological science. The poem reworks a case study in Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia; or, The Laws of Organic Life* (1796).[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *lively*[Return to reference °](#)

# Simon Lee<sup>1</sup>

## *The Old Huntsman*

### WITH AN INCIDENT IN WHICH HE WAS CONCERNED

In the sweet shire of Cardigan,<sup>2</sup>  
Not far from pleasant Ivor-hall,  
An old man dwells, a little man,—  
'Tis said he once was tall.  
Full five-and-thirty years he lived  
5 A running huntsman<sup>3</sup> merry;  
And still the centre of his cheek  
Is red as a ripe cherry.

No man like him the horn could sound,  
And hill and valley rang with glee  
10 When Echo bandied, round and round,  
The halloo of Simon Lee.  
In those proud days, he little cared  
For husbandry or tillage;  
To blither tasks did Simon rouse  
15 The sleepers of the village.

He all the country could outrun,  
Could leave both man and horse behind;  
And often, ere the chase was done,  
He reeled, and was stone-blind.<sup>4</sup>  
20 And still there's something in the world  
At which his heart rejoices;  
For when the chiming hounds are out,  
He dearly loves their voices!

25 But, oh the heavy change!<sup>4</sup>—bereft  
Of health, strength, friends, and kindred, see!  
Old Simon to the world is left  
In liveried<sup>5</sup> poverty.  
His Master's dead,—and no one now  
Dwells in the Hall of Ivor;  
30 Men, dogs, and horses, all are dead;  
He is the sole survivor.

And he is lean and he is sick;  
His body, dwindled and awry,  
Rests upon ankles swoln and thick;  
35 His legs are thin and dry.  
One prop he has, and only one,  
His wife, an aged woman,  
Lives with him, near the waterfall,  
Upon the village Common.

40  
Beside their moss-grown hut of clay,  
Not twenty paces from the door,  
A scrap of land they have, but they  
Are poorest of the poor.  
This scrap of land he from the heath  
45 Enclosed when he was stronger;  
But what to them avails the land  
Which he can till no longer?

Oft, working by her Husband's side,  
Ruth does what Simon cannot do;  
50 For she, with scanty cause for pride,  
Is stouter<sup>o</sup> of the two.  
And, though you with your utmost skill  
From labour could not wean them,  
'Tis very, very little—all  
55 That they can do between them.

Few months of life has he in store  
As he to you will tell,  
For still, the more he works, the more  
Do his weak ankles swell.  
60 My gentle Reader, I perceive  
How patiently you've waited,  
And now I fear that you expect  
Some tale will be related.

O Reader! had you in your mind  
65 Such stores as silent thought can bring,  
O gentle Reader! you would find  
A tale in every thing.  
What more I have to say is short,  
And you must kindly take it:  
70 It is no tale; but, should you think,  
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.

One summer-day I chanced to see  
This old Man doing all he could  
To unearth the root of an old tree,  
75 A stump of rotten wood.  
The mattock tottered in his hand;  
So vain was his endeavour,  
That at the root of the old tree  
He might have worked for ever.  
80

"You're overtasked, good Simon Lee,  
Give me your tool," to him I said;  
And at the word right gladly he  
Received my proffered aid.  
85 I struck, and with a single blow  
The tangled root I severed,  
At which the poor old Man so long  
And vainly had endeavoured.

90       The tears into his eyes were brought,  
           And thanks and praises seemed to run  
           So fast out of his heart, I thought  
           They never would have done.  
           —I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
           With coldness still returning;  
 95       Alas! the gratitude of men  
           Hath oftener left me mourning.

1798

1798, 1845

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This old man had been huntsman to the Squires of Alfoxden. \* \* \* I have, after an interval of 45 years, the image of the old man as fresh before my eyes as if I had seen him yesterday. The expression when the hounds were out, "I dearly love their voices," was word for word from his own lips [*Wordsworth's note*, 1843]. Wordsworth and Dorothy had lived at Alfoxden House, Somersetshire, in 1797–98.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wordsworth relocates the incident from Somersetshire to Cardiganshire in Wales.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Manager of the hunt and the person in charge of the hounds.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Compare Milton's "Lycidas," line 37: "But O the heavy change, now thou art gone."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Livery was the uniform worn by the male servants of a household.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *totally blind*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stronger, sturdier*[Return to reference °](#)

# We Are Seven<sup>1</sup>

\_\_\_\_\_ A simple Child,  
That lightly draws its breath,  
And feels its life in every limb,  
What should it know of death?

5 I met a little cottage Girl:  
She was eight years old, she said;  
Her hair was thick with many a curl  
That clustered round her head.

10 She had a rustic, woodland air,  
And she was wildly clad:  
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;  
—Her beauty made me glad.

15 "Sisters and brothers, little Maid,  
How many may you be?"  
"How many? Seven in all," she said,  
And wondering looked at me.

20 "And where are they? I pray you tell."  
She answered, "Seven are we;  
And two of us at Conway<sup>2</sup> dwell,  
And two are gone to sea.

"Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
My sister and my brother;  
And, in the church-yard cottage, I  
Dwell near them with my mother."

"You say that two at Conway dwell,

25       And two are gone to sea,  
      Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,  
      Sweet Maid, how this may be."

30       Then did the little Maid reply,  
      "Seven boys and girls are we;  
      Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
      Beneath the church-yard tree."

35       "You run about, my little Maid,  
      Your limbs they are alive;  
      If two are in the church-yard laid,  
      Then ye are only five."

40       "Their graves are green, they may be seen,"  
      The little Maid replied,  
      "Twelve steps or more from my mother's door,  
      And they are side by side.

      "My stockings there I often knit,  
      My kerchief there I hem;  
      And there upon the ground I sit,  
      And sing a song to them.

45       "And often after sun-set, Sir,  
      When it is light and fair,  
      I take my little porringer,<sup>3</sup>  
      And eat my supper there.

50       "The first that died was sister Jane;  
      In bed she moaning lay,  
      Till God released her of her pain;  
      And then she went away.

      "So in the church-yard she was laid;  
      And, when the grass was dry,  
      Together round her grave we played,

55        My brother John and I.  
              "And when the ground was white with snow,  
              And I could run and slide,  
              My brother John was forced to go,  
              And he lies by her side."  
 60  
              "How many are you, then," said I,  
              "If they two are in heaven?"  
              Quick was the little Maid's reply,  
              "O Master! we are seven."  
              "But they are dead; those two are dead!  
 65        Their spirits are in heaven!"  
              'Twas throwing words away; for still  
              The little Maid would have her will,  
              And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

1798

1798, 1815

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Written at Alfoxden in the spring of 1798. \* \* \* \* \* The little girl who is the heroine I met within the area of Goodrich Castle [in the Wye Valley north of Tintern Abbey] in the year 1793 [*Wordsworth's note*, 1843]. Wordsworth also tells us that, "while walking to and fro," he composed the last stanza first, beginning with the last line, and that Coleridge contributed the first stanza.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A seaport town in north Wales.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Bowl for porridge.[Return to reference 3](#)



## Lines Written in Early Spring

I heard a thousand blended notes,  
While in a grove I sate reclined,  
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

5 To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man.

10 Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,  
The periwinkle<sup>1</sup> trailed its wreaths,  
And 'tis my faith that every flower  
Enjoys the air it breathes.

15 The birds around me hopped and played,  
Their thoughts I cannot measure:—  
But the least motion which they made,  
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

20 The budding twigs spread out their fan,  
To catch the breezy air;  
And I must think, do all I can,  
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,  
If such be Nature's holy plan,<sup>2</sup>  
Have I not reason to lament  
What man has made of man?

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A trailing evergreen plant with small blue flowers (U.S. myrtle). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The version of these two lines in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 reads: "If I these thoughts may not prevent, / If such be of my creed the plan." [Return to reference 2](#)

# The Thorn<sup>1</sup>

## 1

“There is a Thorn<sup>2</sup>—it looks so old,  
In truth, you’d find it hard to say  
How it could ever have been young,  
It looks so old and grey.  
5 Not higher than a two years’ child  
It stands erect, this aged Thorn;  
No leaves it has, no prickly points;  
It is a mass of knotted joints,  
A wretched thing forlorn.  
10 It stands erect, and like a stone  
With lichens is it overgrown.

## 2

“Like rock or stone, it is o’ergrown,  
With lichens to the very top,  
And hung with heavy tufts of moss,  
A melancholy crop:  
15 Up from the earth these mosses creep,  
And this poor Thorn they clasp it round  
So close, you’d say that they are bent  
With plain and manifest intent  
To drag it to the ground;  
20 And all have joined in one endeavour  
To bury this poor Thorn for ever.

## 3

25 "High on a mountain's highest ridge,  
Where oft the stormy winter gale  
Cuts like a scythe, while through the clouds  
It sweeps from vale to vale;  
Not five yards from the mountain path,  
This Thorn you on your left espy;  
And to the left, three yards beyond,  
You see a little muddy pond  
30 Of water—never dry  
Though but of compass small, and bare  
To thirsty suns and parching air.

## 4

35 "And, close beside this aged Thorn,  
There is a fresh and lovely sight,  
A beauteous heap, a hill of moss,  
Just half a foot in height.  
All lovely colours there you see,  
All colours that were ever seen;  
And mossy network too is there,  
40 As if by hand of lady fair  
The work had woven been;  
And cups, <sup>o</sup> the darlings of the eye,  
So deep is their vermilion dye.

## 5

45 "Ah me! what lovely tints are there  
Of olive green and scarlet bright,  
In spikes, in branches, and in stars,  
Green, red, and pearly white!  
This heap of earth o'ergrown with moss,  
Which close beside the Thorn you see,

50 So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,  
Is like an infant's grave in size,  
As like as like can be:  
But never, never any where,  
55 An infant's grave was half so fair.

## 6

"Now would you see this aged Thorn,  
This pond, and beauteous hill of moss,  
You must take care and choose your time  
The mountain when to cross.  
60 For oft there sits between the heap  
So like an infant's grave in size,  
And that same pond of which I spoke,  
A Woman in a scarlet cloak,  
And to herself she cries,  
65 'Oh misery! oh misery!  
Oh woe is me! oh misery!'

## 7

"At all times of the day and night  
This wretched Woman thither goes;  
And she is known to every star,  
And every wind that blows;  
70 And there, beside the Thorn, she sits  
When the blue daylight's in the skies,  
And when the whirlwind's on the hill,  
Or frosty air is keen and still,  
And to herself she cries,  
75 'Oh misery! oh misery!  
Oh woe is me! oh misery!' "

## 8

“Now wherefore, thus, by day and night,  
In rain, in tempest, and in snow,  
Thus to the dreary mountain-top  
80 Does this poor Woman go?  
And why sits she beside the Thorn  
When the blue daylight’s in the sky  
Or when the whirlwind’s on the hill,  
Or frosty air is keen and still,  
85 And wherefore does she cry?—  
O wherefore? wherefore? tell me why  
Does she repeat that doleful cry?”

## 9

“I cannot tell; I wish I could;  
For the true reason no one knows:  
90 But would you gladly view the spot,  
The spot to which she goes;  
The hillock like an infant’s grave,  
The pond—and Thorn, so old and grey;  
Pass by her door—’tis seldom shut—  
95 And, if you see her in her hut—  
Then to the spot away!  
I never heard of such as dare  
Approach the spot when she is there.”

## 10

“But wherefore to the mountain-top  
100 Can this unhappy Woman go,  
Whatever star is in the skies,  
Whatever wind may blow?”

105 "Full twenty years are past and gone  
Since she (her name is Martha Ray)<sup>3</sup>  
Gave with a maiden's true good-will  
Her company to Stephen Hill;  
And she was blithe and gay,  
While friends and kindred all approved  
110 Of him whom tenderly she loved.

## 11

115 "And they had fixed the wedding day,  
The morning that must wed them both;  
But Stephen to another Maid  
Had sworn another oath;  
And, with this other Maid, to church  
Unthinking Stephen went—  
Poor Martha! on that woeful day  
A pang of pitiless dismay  
Into her soul was sent;  
120 A fire was kindled in her breast,  
Which might not burn itself to rest.

## 12

125 "They say, full six months after this,  
While yet the summer leaves were green,  
She to the mountain-top would go,  
And there was often seen.  
What could she seek?—or wish to hide?  
Her state to any eye was plain;  
She was with child,<sup>o</sup> and she was mad;  
Yet often was she sober sad  
From her exceeding pain.  
130 O guilty Father—would that death

Had saved him from that breach of faith!

## 13

135 "Sad case for such a brain to hold  
Communion with a stirring child!  
Sad case, as you may think, for one  
Who had a brain so wild!  
Last Christmas-eve we talked of this,  
And grey-haired Wilfred of the glen  
Held that the unborn infant wrought  
140 About its mother's heart, and brought  
Her senses back again:  
And, when at last her time drew near,  
Her looks were calm, her senses clear.

## 14

145 "More know I not, I wish I did,  
And it should all be told to you;  
For what became of this poor child  
No mortal ever knew;  
Nay—if a child to her was born  
No earthly tongue could ever tell;  
150 And if 'twas born alive or dead,  
Far less could this with proof be said;  
But some remember well,  
That Martha Ray about this time  
Would up the mountain often climb.

## 15

"And all that winter, when at night  
The wind blew from the mountain-peak,



155 'Twas worth your while, though in the dark,  
The churchyard path to seek:  
For many a time and oft were heard  
Cries coming from the mountain head:  
160 Some plainly living voices were;  
And others, I've heard many swear,  
Were voices of the dead:  
I cannot think, whate'er they say,  
165 They had to do with Martha Ray.

## 16

"But that she goes to this old Thorn,  
The Thorn which I described to you,  
And there sits in a scarlet cloak,  
I will be sworn is true.  
For one day with my telescope,  
170 To view the ocean wide and bright,  
When to this country first I came,  
Ere I had heard of Martha's name,  
I climbed the mountain's height:—  
A storm came on, and I could see  
175 No object higher than my knee.

## 17

" 'Twas mist and rain, and storm and rain:  
No screen, no fence could I discover;  
And then the wind! in sooth, it was  
A wind full ten times over.  
180 I looked around, I thought I saw  
A jutting crag,—and off I ran,  
Head-foremost, through the driving rain,  
The shelter of the crag to gain;

185 And, as I am a man,  
Instead of jutting crag, I found  
A Woman seated on the ground.

## 18

190 "I did not speak—I saw her face;  
Her face!—it was enough for me;  
I turned about and heard her cry,  
'Oh misery! oh misery!'  
And there she sits, until the moon  
Through half the clear blue sky will go;  
And, when the little breezes make  
The waters of the pond to shake,  
195 As all the country know,  
She shudders, and you hear her cry,  
'Oh misery! oh misery!' "

## 19

200 "But what's the Thorn? and what the pond?  
And what the hill of moss to her?  
And what the creeping breeze that comes  
The little pond to stir?"  
"I cannot tell; but some will say  
She hanged her baby on the tree;  
Some say she drowned it in the pond,  
205 Which is a little step beyond:  
But all and each agree,  
The little Babe was buried there,  
Beneath that hill of moss so fair.

## 20

210 "I've heard, the moss is spotted red  
With drops of that poor infant's blood;  
But kill a new-born infant thus,  
I do not think she could!  
Some say, if to the pond you go,  
And fix on it a steady view,  
215 The shadow of a babe you trace,  
A baby and a baby's face,  
And that it looks at you;  
Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain  
220 The baby looks at you again.

## 21

"And some had sworn an oath that she  
Should be to public justice brought;  
And for the little infant's bones  
With spades they would have sought.  
But instantly the hill of moss  
225 Before their eyes began to stir!  
And, for full fifty yards around,  
The grass—it shook upon the ground!  
Yet all do still aver  
The little Babe lies buried there,  
230 Beneath that hill of moss so fair.

## 22

"I cannot tell how this may be,  
But plain it is the Thorn is bound  
With heavy tufts of moss that strive  
To drag it to the ground;  
235 And this I know, full many a time,  
When she was on the mountain high,

240

By day, and in the silent night,  
When all the stars shone clear and bright,  
That I have heard her cry,  
'Oh misery! oh misery!  
Oh woe is me! oh misery!' "

Mar.–Apr. 1798

1798, 1845

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill [in Somersetshire], on a stormy day, a thorn which I had often past, in calm and bright weather, without noticing it. I said to myself, "Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment?" I began the poem accordingly, and composed it with great rapidity [Wordsworth's note, 1843]. In the prefatory Advertisement to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth wrote, "The poem of the Thorn . . . is not supposed to be spoken in the author's own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Hawthorn, a thorny shrub or small tree.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Wordsworth gives the woman the name of the victim at the center of one of the 18th century's most famous murder trials. Martha Ray, mistress to a nobleman, was murdered in 1779 by a rejected suitor, a clergyman who claimed he had been driven to the deed by "love's madness." One of the illegitimate children whom this Martha Ray bore to the Earl of Sandwich was Wordsworth and Coleridge's friend Basil Montagu.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *blossoms*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pregnant*[Return to reference](#) °

## Expostulation and Reply<sup>1</sup>

"Why, William, on that old grey stone,  
Thus for the length of half a day,  
Why, William, sit you thus alone,  
And dream your time away?

5        "Where are your books?—that light bequeathed  
To Beings else forlorn and blind!  
Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed  
From dead men to their kind.

10       "You look round on your Mother Earth,  
As if she for no purpose bore you;  
As if you were her first-born birth,  
And none had lived before you!"

15       One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,  
When life was sweet, I knew not why,  
To me my good friend Matthew spake,  
And thus I made reply.

20       "The eye—it cannot choose but see;  
We cannot bid the ear be still;  
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,  
Against or with our will.

"Nor less I deem that there are Powers  
Which of themselves our minds impress;  
That we can feed this mind of ours  
In a wise passiveness.

"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum  
Of things for ever speaking,

25           That nothing of itself will come,  
              But we must still be seeking?

30           "—Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,  
              Conversing<sup>2</sup> as I may,  
              I sit upon this old grey stone,  
              And dream my time away."

Spring 1798

1798

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
This and the companion poem, "The Tables Turned," have often been attacked—and defended—as Wordsworth's own statement about the comparative merits of nature and of books. But they are a dialogue between two friends who rally one another by the usual device of overstating parts of a whole truth. In the 1798 Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth said that the pieces originated in a conversation "with a friend who was somewhat unreasonably attached to modern books of moral philosophy." In 1843 he noted that the idea of learning when the mind is in a state of "wise passiveness" made this poem a favorite of the Quakers, who  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In the old sense of "communing" (with the "things for ever speaking").[Return to reference 2](#)

# The Tables Turned

## *An Evening Scene on the Same Subject*

Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;  
Or surely you'll grow double:◊  
Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;  
Why all this toil and trouble?

5       The sun, above the mountain's head,  
A freshening lustre mellow  
Through all the long green fields has spread,  
His first sweet evening yellow.

10       Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,◊  
How sweet his music! on my life,  
There's more of wisdom in it.

15       And hark! how blithe the throstle◊ sings!  
He, too, is no mean preacher:  
Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your Teacher.

20       She has a world of ready wealth,  
Our minds and hearts to bless—  
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,  
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.



25 Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—  
We murder to dissect.

30 Enough of Science and of Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;°  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

1798

1798, 1832

## Notes

- °: *double over* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *small finch* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *song thrush* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pages* [Return to reference °](#)

# Old Man Travelling;

## *Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a Sketch*

5                                   The little hedge-row birds,  
That peck along the road, regard him not.  
He travels on, and in his face, his step,  
His gait, is one expression; every limb,  
His look and bending figure, all bespeak  
5 A man who does not move with pain, but moves  
With thought—He is insensibly subdued  
To settled quiet: he is one by whom  
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom  
10 Long patience has such mild composure given,  
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which  
He hath no need. He is by nature led  
To peace so perfect, that the young behold  
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.  
—I asked him whither he was bound, and what  
15 The object of his journey; he replied  
“Sir! I am going many miles to take  
A last leave of my son, a mariner,  
Who from a sea-fight has been brought to  
Falmouth,<sup>1</sup>  
20 And there is dying in an hospital.”<sup>2</sup>

1796–97 1798

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Port town in southwest England.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In his 1799 review of *Lyrical Ballads* Charles Burney objected to the antiwar sentiment he detected in this

conclusion. In the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth cast lines 17–20 as reported rather than direct speech. Starting in 1815, reprints omitted the final five lines altogether.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Lines<sup>1</sup>

### ***Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798***

Five years have past; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a soft inland murmur.<sup>2</sup>—Once again  
5 Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
That on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.  
The day is come when I again repose  
10 Here, under this dark sycamore, and view  
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,  
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,  
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves  
'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see  
15 These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines  
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,  
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!  
With some uncertain notice, as might seem  
20 Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,  
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire  
The Hermit sits alone.

These beauteous forms,  
Through a long absence, have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
25 But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And passing even into my purer mind,  
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too  
30 Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On that best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,  
35 To them I may have owed another gift,  
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen<sup>o</sup> of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
40 Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,  
In which the affections gently lead us on,—  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
45 In body, and become a living soul:  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.

If this

Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft—  
50 In darkness and amid the many shapes  
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir  
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,  
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart—  
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,  
55 O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,  
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished  
thought,

With many recognitions dim and faint,  
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,  
60 The picture of the mind revives again:  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. And so I dare to hope,  
65 Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when  
first  
I came among these hills; when like a roe<sup>o</sup>  
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides  
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,  
Wherever nature led: more like a man  
70 Flying from something that he dreads, than one  
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then  
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,  
And their glad animal movements all gone by)  
To me was all in all.—I cannot paint  
75 What then I was. The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
Their colours and their forms, were then to me  
An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
80 That had no need of a remoter charm,  
By thought supplied, nor any interest  
Unborrowed from the eye.—That time is past,  
And all its aching joys are now no more,  
And all its dizzy raptures.<sup>3</sup> Not for this  
85 Faint<sup>o</sup> I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts  
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,  
Abundant recompense. For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
90 The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power

To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
95 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
100 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
105 Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,<sup>4</sup>  
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
110 Of all my moral being.

Nor perchance,  
If I were not thus taught, should I the more  
Suffer my genial spirits<sup>5</sup> to decay:  
For thou art with me here upon the banks  
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,<sup>6</sup>  
115 My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once,  
120 My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,  
Knowing that Nature never did betray  
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,  
Through all the years of this our life, to lead  
From joy to joy: for she can so inform

125 The mind that is within us, so impress  
With quietness and beauty, and so feed  
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,<sup>7</sup>  
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,  
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all  
130 The dreary intercourse of daily life,  
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb  
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold  
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon  
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;  
135 And let the misty mountain-winds be free  
To blow against thee: and, in after years,  
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured  
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind  
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,  
140 Thy memory be as a dwelling-place  
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,  
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,  
Should be thy portion,<sup>9</sup> with what healing thoughts  
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,  
145 And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance—  
If I should be where I no more can hear  
Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams  
Of past existence<sup>8</sup>—wilt thou then forget  
That on the banks of this delightful stream  
150 We stood together; and that I, so long  
A worshipper of Nature, hither came  
Unwearied in that service; rather say  
With warmer love—oh! with far deeper zeal  
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget,  
155 That after many wanderings, many years  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

July 1798

1798, 1845



## Endnotes

- Note 1: No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of 4 or 5 days, with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol [*Wordsworth's note*, 1843]. The poem was printed as the last item in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The river is not affected by the tides a few miles above Tintern [*Wordsworth's note*]. Until 1845 the text had "sweet" for "soft," meaning fresh, not salty.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Lines 66ff. contain Wordsworth's famed description of the three stages of his growing up, defined in terms of his evolving relations to the natural scene: the young boy's purely physical responsiveness (lines 73–74); the postadolescent's aching, dizzy, and equivocal passions—a love that is more like dread (lines 67–72, 75–85: this was his state of mind on the occasion of his first visit); his present state (lines 85ff.), in which for the first time he adds thought to sense.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: This line has a close resemblance to an admirable line of Young, the exact expression of which I cannot recollect [*Wordsworth's note*]. Edward Young in *Night Thoughts* (1744) says that the human senses "half create the wondrous world they see."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Creative powers. ("Genial" is here the adjectival form of the noun *genius*.)[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: His sister, Dorothy.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In the opening of *Paradise Lost* 7, Milton describes himself as fallen on "evil days" and "evil tongues" and with "dangers compassed round" (lines 26–27).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, reminders of his own "past existence" five years earlier (see lines 116–19).[Return to reference 8](#)

# Notes

- °: *burden*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *deer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lose heart*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *inheritance, dowry*[Return to reference](#) °

**Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)** To the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published jointly with Coleridge in 1798, Wordsworth prefixed an "Advertisement" asserting that the majority of the poems were "to be considered as experiments" to determine "how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." In the second, two-volume edition of 1800, Wordsworth, aided by frequent conversations with Coleridge, expanded the Advertisement into a Preface that justified the poems not as experiments, but as exemplifying the principles of all good poetry. The Preface was enlarged for the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published two years later. This last version of 1802 is reprinted here.

Although some of its ideas had antecedents in the later eighteenth century, the Preface as a whole deserves its reputation as a revolutionary manifesto about the nature of poetry. Like many radical statements, however, it claims to go back to the implicit principles that governed the great poetry of the past but have been perverted in recent practice. Most discussions of the Preface, following the lead of Coleridge in [chapters 14](#) and [17](#) of his *Biographia Literaria*, have focused on Wordsworth's assertions about the valid language of poetry, on which he bases his attack on the "poetic diction" of eighteenth-century poets. As Coleridge pointed out, Wordsworth's argument about this issue is far from clear. However, Wordsworth's questioning of the underlying premises of neoclassical poetry went even further. His Preface implicitly denies the traditional assumption that the poetic genres constitute a hierarchy, from epic and tragedy at the top down through comedy, satire, pastoral, to the short lyric at the lowest reaches of the poetic scale; he also rejects the traditional principle of "decorum," which required the poet to arrange matters so that the poem's subject (especially the social class of its protagonists) and its level of diction conformed to the status of the literary kind on the poetic scale.

When Wordsworth asserted in the Preface that he deliberately chose to represent "incidents and situations from common life," he translated his democratic sympathies into critical terms, justifying his

use of peasants, children, outcasts, criminals, and madwomen as serious subjects of poetic and even tragic concern. He also undertook to write in "a selection of language really used by men," on the grounds that there can be no "essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." In making this claim Wordsworth attacked the neoclassical principle that required the language, in many kinds of poems, to be elevated over everyday speech by a special, more refined and dignified diction and by artful figures of speech. Wordsworth's views about the valid language of poetry are based on the new premise that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"—spontaneous, that is, at the moment of composition, even though the process is influenced by prior thought and acquired poetic skill.

Wordsworth's assertions about the materials and diction of poetry have been greatly influential in expanding the range of serious literature to include the common people and ordinary things and events, as well as in justifying a poetry of sincerity rather than of artifice, expressed in the ordinary language of its time. But in the long view other aspects of his Preface have been no less significant in establishing its importance, not only as a turning point in English criticism but also as a central document in modern culture.

Wordsworth feared that a new urban, industrial society's mass media and mass culture (glimpsed in the Preface when he refers derisively to contemporary Gothic novels and German melodramas) were threatening to blunt the human mind's "discriminatory powers" and to "reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor." He attributed to imaginative literature the primary role in keeping the human beings who live in such societies emotionally alive and morally sensitive. Literature, that is, could keep humans essentially human.

## ***From Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802)***

### **[THE SUBJECT AND LANGUAGE OF POETRY]**

The first volume of these poems has already been submitted to general perusal. It was published, as an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a poet may rationally endeavour to impart.

I had formed no very inaccurate estimate of the probable effect of those poems: I flattered myself that they who should be pleased with them would read them with more than common pleasure: and, on the other hand, I was well aware, that by those who should dislike them they would be read with more than common dislike. The result has differed from my expectation in this only, that I have pleased a greater number than I ventured to hope I should please.

For the sake of variety, and from a consciousness of my own weakness, I was induced to request the assistance of a friend,<sup>1</sup> who furnished me with the poems of the *Ancient Mariner*, the *Foster-Mother's Tale*, the *Nightingale*, and the poem entitled *Love*. I should not, however, have requested this assistance, had I not believed that the poems of my friend would in a great measure have the same tendency as my own, and that, though there would be found a difference, there would be found no discordance in the colours of our style; as our opinions on the subject of poetry do almost entirely coincide.

Several of my friends are anxious for the success of these poems from a belief, that, if the views with which they were composed were indeed realized, a class of poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the

multiplicity, and in the quality of its moral relations: and on this account they have advised me to prefix a systematic defence of the theory upon which the poems were written. But I was unwilling to undertake the task, because I knew that on this occasion the reader would look coldly upon my arguments, since I might be suspected of having been principally influenced by the selfish and foolish hope of *reasoning* him into an approbation of these particular poems: and I was still more unwilling to undertake the task, because, adequately to display my opinions, and fully to enforce my arguments, would require a space wholly disproportionate to the nature of a preface. For to treat the subject with the clearness and coherence of which I believe it susceptible, it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved; which, again, could not be determined, without pointing out, in what manner language and the human mind act and re-act on each other, and without retracing the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself. I have therefore altogether declined to enter regularly upon this defence; yet I am sensible, that there would be some impropriety in abruptly obtruding upon the public, without a few words of introduction, poems so materially different from those upon which general approbation is at present bestowed.

It is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse an author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association; that he not only thus apprizes the reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded. This exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language must in different eras of literature have excited very different expectations: for example, in the age of Catullus, Terence, and Lucretius and that of Statius or Claudian,<sup>2</sup> and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope. I will not take upon me to determine the exact import of the promise which by the act of writing in verse an author, in the present day, makes to his reader; but I am certain, it will appear to many persons that I have

not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted. They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title. I hope therefore the reader will not censure me, if I attempt to state what I have proposed to myself to perform; and also (as far as the limits of a preface will permit) to explain some of the chief reasons which have determined me in the choice of my purpose: that at least he may be spared any unpleasant feeling of disappointment, and that I myself may be protected from the most dishonorable accusation which can be brought against an author, namely, that of an indolence which prevents him from endeavouring to ascertain what is his duty, or, when this duty is ascertained, prevents him from performing it.

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of

rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.<sup>3</sup>

I cannot, however, be insensible of the present outcry against the triviality and meanness both of thought and language, which some of my contemporaries have occasionally introduced into their metrical compositions; and I acknowledge, that this defect, where it exists, is more dishonorable to the writer's own character than false refinement or arbitrary innovation, though I should contend at the same time that it is far less pernicious in the sum of its consequences. From such verses the poems in these volumes will be found distinguished at least by one mark of difference, that each of them has a worthy *purpose*. Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*. If in this opinion I am mistaken, I can have little right to the name of a poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached,



were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.

I have said that each of these poems has a purpose. I have also informed my reader what this purpose will be found principally to be: namely, to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement. But, speaking in language somewhat more appropriate, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature. This object I have endeavored in these short essays to attain by various means; by tracing the maternal passion through many of its more subtile<sup>4</sup> windings, as in the poems of the *Idiot Boy* and the *Mad Mother*; by accompanying the last struggles of a human being, at the approach of death, cleaving in solitude to life and society, as in the poem of the *Forsaken Indian*; by shewing, as in the stanzas entitled *We Are Seven*, the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion; or by displaying the strength of fraternal, or to speak more philosophically, of moral attachment when early associated with the great and beautiful objects of nature, as in *The Brothers*; or, as in the Incident of *Simon Lee*, by placing my reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and

more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them. It has also been part of my general purpose to attempt to sketch characters under the influence of less impassioned feelings, as in the *Two April Mornings*, *The Fountain*, *The Old Man Travelling*, *The Two Thieves*, &c., characters of which the elements are simple, belonging rather to nature than to manners,<sup>5</sup> such as exist now, and will probably always exist, and which from their constitution may be distinctly and profitably contemplated. I will not abuse the indulgence of my reader by dwelling longer upon this subject; but it is proper that I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these poems from the popular poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling. My meaning will be rendered perfectly intelligible by referring my reader to the poems entitled *Poor Susan* and the *Childless Father*, particularly to the last stanza of the latter poem.

I will not suffer a sense of false modesty to prevent me from asserting, that I point my reader's attention to this mark of distinction, far less for the sake of these particular poems than from the general importance of the subject. The subject is indeed important! For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross<sup>6</sup> and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for

extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.<sup>7</sup> To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies,<sup>8</sup> and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.—When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it; and, reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil, I should be oppressed with no dishonorable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it which are equally inherent and indestructible; and did I not further add to this impression a belief, that the time is approaching when the evil will be systematically opposed, by men of greater powers, and with far more distinguished success.

Having dwelt thus long on the subjects and aim of these poems, I shall request the reader's permission to apprise him of a few circumstances relating to their *style*, in order, among other reasons, that I may not be censured for not having performed what I never attempted. The reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas<sup>9</sup> rarely occur in these volumes; and, I hope, are utterly rejected as an ordinary device to elevate the style, and raise it above prose. I have proposed to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language. They are, indeed, a figure of speech occasionally prompted by passion, and I have made use of them as such; but I have endeavoured utterly to reject them as a mechanical device of style, or as a family language which writers in metre seem to lay claim to by prescription. I have wished to keep my reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him. I am, however, well aware that others who pursue a

different track may interest him likewise; I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a different claim of my own. There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction;<sup>1</sup> I have taken as much pains to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it; this I have done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men, and further, because the pleasure which I have proposed to myself to impart is of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry. I do not know how, without being culpably particular, I can give my reader a more exact notion of the style in which I wished these poems to be written than by informing him that I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject, consequently, I hope that there is in these poems little falsehood of description, and that my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance. Something I must have gained by this practice, as it is friendly to one property of all good poetry, namely, good sense; but it has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of poets. I have also thought it expedient to restrict myself still further, having abstained from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad poets, till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower.

If in a poem there should be found a series of lines, or even a single line, in which the language, though naturally arranged and according to the strict laws of metre, does not differ from that of prose, there is a numerous class of critics, who, when they stumble upon these prosaisms as they call them, imagine that they have made a notable discovery, and exult over the poet as over a man ignorant of his own profession. Now these men would establish a canon of criticism which the reader will conclude he must utterly reject, if he wishes to be pleased with these volumes. And it would be a most easy task to prove to him, that not only the language of a

large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well written. The truth of this assertion might be demonstrated by innumerable passages from almost all the poetical writings, even of Milton himself. I have not space for much quotation; but, to illustrate the subject in a general manner, I will here adduce a short composition of Gray, who was at the head of those who by their reasonings have attempted to widen the space of separation betwixt prose and metrical composition, and was more than any other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction.<sup>2</sup>

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,  
And reddening Phoebus lifts his golden fire:  
The birds in vain their amorous descant join,  
Or cheerful fields resume their green attire:  
These ears, alas! for other notes repine;  
*A different object do these eyes require;*  
*My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;*  
*And in my breast the imperfect joys expire;*  
Yet Morning smiles the busy race to cheer,  
And new-born pleasure brings to happier men;  
The fields to all their wonted tribute bear;  
To warm their little loves the birds complain.  
*I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear*  
*And weep the more because I weep in vain.*

It will easily be perceived that the only part of this sonnet which is of any value is the lines printed in italics: it is equally obvious, that, except in the rhyme, and in the use of the single word "fruitless" for fruitlessly, which is so far a defect, the language of these lines does in no respect differ from that of prose.

By the foregoing quotation I have shewn that the language of prose may yet be well adapted to poetry; and I have previously asserted that a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good prose. I will go further. I do not doubt that it may be safely affirmed, that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. We are fond of tracing the resemblance between poetry and painting, and, accordingly, we call them sisters: but where shall we find bonds of connection sufficiently strict to typify the affinity betwixt metrical and prose composition? They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree; poetry<sup>3</sup> sheds no tears "such as Angels weep,"<sup>4</sup> but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial ichor<sup>5</sup> that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The "friend" of course is Coleridge.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wordsworth's implied contrast is between the naturalness and simplicity of the first three Roman poets (who wrote in the last two centuries B.C.E.) and the elaborate artifice of the last two Roman poets (Statius wrote in the 1st and Claudian in the 4th century C.E.).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: It is worthwhile here to observe that the affecting parts of Chaucer are almost always expressed in language pure and universally intelligible even to this day [*Wordsworth's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Subtle.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Social custom.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Coarse.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: This was the period of the wars against France, of industrial urbanization, and of the rapid proliferation in England of daily newspapers.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Wordsworth had in mind the “Gothic” terror novels by writers such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis and the sentimental melodrama, then immensely popular in England, of August von Kotzebue and his German contemporaries.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: This practice was common in 18th-century poetry. Samuel Johnson, for instance, in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), has “Observation . . . survey[ing] mankind” and “Vengeance listen[ing] to the fool’s request” (lines 1–2, 14).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In the sense of words, phrases, and figures of speech not commonly used in conversation or prose that are regarded as especially appropriate to poetry.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Thomas Gray (author in 1751 of the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”) had written, in a letter to Richard West, that “the language of the age is never the language of poetry.” The poem that follows is Gray’s “Sonnet on the Death of Richard West.”[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: I here use the word “poetry” (though against my own judgment) as opposed to the word “prose,” and synonymous with metrical composition. But much confusion has been introduced into criticism by this contradistinction of poetry and prose, instead of the more philosophical one of poetry and matter of fact, or science. The only strict antithesis to prose is metre; nor is this, in truth, a *strict* antithesis; because lines and passages of metre so naturally occur in writing prose, that it would be scarcely possible to avoid them, even were it desirable [*Wordsworth’s note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Milton’s *Paradise Lost* 1.620.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In Greek mythology the fluid in the veins of the gods.[Return to reference 5](#)



## **[“WHAT IS A POET?”]**

Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, I ask what is meant by the word “poet”? What is a poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than any thing which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves; whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

But, whatever portion of this faculty we may suppose even the greatest poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt but that the language which it will suggest to him, must, in liveliness and truth, fall far short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself. However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation



is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure. Here, then, he will apply the principle on which I have so much insisted, namely, that of selection; on this he will depend for removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion; he will feel that there is no necessity to trick out<sup>6</sup> or to elevate nature: and, the more industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words, which his fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.

But it may be said by those who do not object to the general spirit of these remarks, that, as it is impossible for the poet to produce upon all occasions language as exquisitely fitted for the passion as that which the real passion itself suggests, it is proper that he should consider himself as in the situation of a translator, who deems himself justified when he substitutes excellences of another kind for those which are unattainable by him; and endeavours occasionally to surpass his original, in order to make some amends for the general inferiority to which he feels that he must submit. But this would be to encourage idleness and unmanly despair. Further, it is the language of men who speak of what they do not understand; who talk of poetry as a matter of amusement and idle pleasure; who will converse with us as gravely about a *taste* for poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinac<sup>7</sup> or sherry. Aristotle, I have been told, hath said, that poetry is the most philosophic of all writing;<sup>8</sup> it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own

testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature. The obstacles which stand in the way of the fidelity of the biographer and historian, and of their consequent utility, are incalculably greater than those which are to be encountered by the poet who has an adequate notion of the dignity of his art. The poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a man. Except this one restriction, there is no object standing between the poet and the image of things; between this, and the biographer and historian there are a thousand.

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgment the more sincere because it is not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves.<sup>9</sup> We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with pain it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure. We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. The man of science, the chemist and mathematician, whatever difficulties and disgusts they may have had to struggle with, know and feel this. However painful may be the objects with which the anatomist's knowledge is connected, he feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge. What then does the poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; he

considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions which by habit become of the nature of intuitions; he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding every where objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment.

To this knowledge which all men carry about with them, and to these sympathies in which without any other discipline than that of our daily life we are fitted to take delight, the poet principally directs his attention. He considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature. And thus the poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature with affections akin to those, which, through labour and length of time, the man of science has raised up in himself, by conversing with those particular parts of nature which are the objects of his studies. The knowledge both of the poet and the man of science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science. Emphatically may it be said of the poet, as Shakespeare hath said of man, "that he looks before and after."<sup>1</sup> He is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things

silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the poet's thoughts are every where; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favorite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man. If the labours of men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the poet will sleep then no more than at present, but he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.<sup>2</sup> If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.—It is not, then, to be supposed that any one, who holds that sublime notion of poetry which I have attempted to convey, will break in upon the sanctity and truth of his pictures by transitory and accidental ornaments, and endeavour to excite admiration of himself by arts, the necessity of which must manifestly depend upon the assumed meanness of his subject.

What I have thus far said applies to poetry in general; but especially to those parts of composition where the poet speaks through the mouth of his characters; and upon this point it appears to have such weight that I will conclude, there are few persons, of good sense, who would not allow that the dramatic parts of

composition are defective, in proportion as they deviate from the real language of nature, and are coloured by a diction of the poet's own, either peculiar to him as an individual poet, or belonging simply to poets in general, to a body of men who, from the circumstance of their compositions being in metre, it is expected will employ a particular language.

It is not, then, in the dramatic parts of composition that we look for this distinction of language; but still it may be proper and necessary where the poet speaks to us in his own person and character. To this I answer by referring my reader to the description which I have before given of a poet. Among the qualities which I have enumerated as principally conducing to form a poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree. The sum of what I have there said is, that the poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions<sup>3</sup> of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. These, and the like, are the sensations and objects which the poet describes, as they are the sensations of other men, and the objects which interest them. The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of men. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly? It might be *proved* that it is impossible. But supposing that this were not the case, the poet might then be allowed to use a peculiar language, when expressing his feelings for his own gratification, or that of men like himself. But poets do not write for poets alone, but for men. Unless therefore we are advocates for that admiration

which depends upon ignorance, and that pleasure which arises from hearing what we do not understand, the poet must descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves. \* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 6: Dress up.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A sweet wine made from muscat grapes. "Rope-dancing": tightrope walking.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Aristotle in fact said that "poetry is more philosophic than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars" (*Poetics* 1451b).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A bold echo of the words of St. Paul, that in God "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In *Hamlet* 4.4.39, Hamlet describes the capability of "looking before and after" as an essential element of being human.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wordsworth is at least right in anticipating the poetry of the machine. His sonnet "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways" is an early instance.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Recurrence.[Return to reference 3](#)

## **[“EMOTION RECOLLECTED IN TRANQUILLITY”]**

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment. Now, if nature be thus cautious in preserving in a state of enjoyment a being thus employed, the poet ought to profit by the lesson thus held forth to him, and ought especially to take care, that whatever passions he communicates to his reader, those passions, if his reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure. Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely, all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling which will always be found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. This effect is always produced in pathetic and impassioned poetry; while, in lighter compositions, the ease and gracefulness with which the poet manages his numbers are themselves confessedly a principal source of the gratification of the reader. I might perhaps include all which it is *necessary* to say upon this subject by affirming, what few persons will deny, that, of two descriptions, either of passions,

manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once. \* \* \*

I know that nothing would have so effectually contributed to further the end which I have in view, as to have shewn of what kind the pleasure is, and how the pleasure is produced, which is confessedly produced by metrical composition essentially different from that which I have here endeavoured to recommend: for the reader will say that he has been pleased by such composition; and what can I do more for him? The power of any art is limited; and he will suspect, that, if I propose to furnish him with new friends, it is only upon condition of his abandoning his old friends. Besides, as I have said, the reader is himself conscious of the pleasure which he has received from such composition, composition to which he has peculiarly attached the endearing name of poetry; and all men feel an habitual gratitude, and something of an honorable bigotry for the objects which have long continued to please them: we not only wish to be pleased, but to be pleased in that particular way in which we have been accustomed to be pleased. There is a host of arguments in these feelings; and I should be the less able to combat them successfully, as I am willing to allow, that, in order entirely to enjoy the poetry which I am recommending, it would be necessary to give up much of what is ordinarily enjoyed. But, would my limits have permitted me to point out how this pleasure is produced, I might have removed many obstacles, and assisted my reader in perceiving that the powers of language are not so limited as he may suppose; and that it is possible that poetry may give other enjoyments, of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature. This part of my subject I have not altogether neglected; but it has been less my present aim to prove, that the interest excited by some other kinds of poetry is less vivid, and less worthy of the nobler powers of the mind, than to offer reasons for presuming, that, if the object which I have proposed to myself were adequately attained, a species of poetry would be produced, which is genuine poetry; in its nature



well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and likewise important in the multiplicity and quality of its moral relations.

From what has been said, and from a perusal of the poems, the reader will be able clearly to perceive the object which I have proposed to myself: he will determine how far I have attained this object; and, what is a much more important question, whether it be worth attaining; and upon the decision of these two questions will rest my claim to the approbation of the public.

1800, 1802

## Strange fits of passion have I known<sup>1</sup>

Strange fits of passion have I known:  
And I will dare to tell,  
But in the Lover's ear alone,  
What once to me befel.

5       When she I loved looked every day  
Fresh as a rose in June,  
I to her cottage bent my way,  
Beneath an evening moon.

10       Upon the moon I fixed my eye,  
All over the wide lea;  
With quickening pace my horse drew nigh  
Those paths so dear to me.

15       And now we reached the orchard-plot;  
And, as we climbed the hill,  
The sinking moon to Lucy's cot  
Came near, and nearer still.

20       In one of those sweet dreams I slept,  
Kind Nature's gentlest boon!  
And all the while my eyes I kept  
On the descending moon.

My horse moved on; hoof after hoof  
He raised, and never stopped:  
When down behind the cottage roof,  
At once, the bright moon dropped.

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide  
Into a Lover's head!



# She dwelt among the untrodden ways

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,<sup>1</sup>  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:

5 A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
—Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

10 She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

1799

1800

## Endnotes

- Note 1: There are several rivers by this name in England, including one in the Lake District.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Three years she grew

Three years she grew in sun and shower,  
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower  
On earth was never sown;  
This Child I to myself will take;  
She shall be mine, and I will make  
5 A Lady of my own.<sup>1</sup>

"Myself will to my darling be  
Both law and impulse: and with me  
The Girl, in rock and plain,  
10 In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,  
Shall feel an overseeing power  
To kindle or restrain.

"She shall be sportive as the fawn  
That wild with glee across the lawn  
Or up the mountain springs;  
15 And hers shall be the breathing balm,  
And hers the silence and the calm  
Of mute insensate things.

"The floating clouds their state shall lend  
To her; for her the willow bend;  
20 Nor shall she fail to see  
Even in the motions of the Storm  
Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form  
By silent sympathy.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear  
25 To her; and she shall lean her ear  
In many a secret place

30       Where rivulets dance their wayward round,  
And beauty born of murmuring sound  
Shall pass into her face.

      "And vital feelings of delight  
Shall rear her form to stately height,  
Her virgin bosom swell;  
Such thoughts to Lucy I will give  
35       While she and I together live  
Here in this happy dell."

      Thus Nature spake—the work was done—  
How soon my Lucy's race was run!  
She died, and left to me  
40       This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;  
The memory of what has been,  
And never more will be.

1799

1800, 1805

## Endnotes

- Note 1: That is, Lucy was three years old when Nature made this promise; line 37 makes clear that Lucy had reached the maturity foretold in the sixth stanza when she died.[Return to reference 1](#)

## A slumber did my spirit seal

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

5 No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal<sup>o</sup> course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

1799

### Notes

1800

- °: *daily*[Return to reference °](#)

## **I travelled among unknown men**

I travelled among unknown men,  
In lands beyond the sea;  
Nor, England! did I know till then  
What love I bore to thee.

5 'Tis past, that melancholy dream!  
Nor will I quit thy shore  
A second time; for still I seem  
To love thee more and more.

10 Among thy mountains did I feel  
The joy of my desire;  
And she I cherished turned her wheel  
Beside an English fire.

15 Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed  
The bowers where Lucy played;  
And thine too is the last green field  
That Lucy's eyes surveyed.

ca. 1801

1807, 1836



# Nutting<sup>1</sup>

—————It seems a day  
(I speak of one from many singled out)  
One of those heavenly days that cannot die;  
When, in the eagerness of boyish hope,  
I left our cottage-threshold, sallying forth  
5 With a huge wallet<sup>o</sup> o'er my shoulder slung,  
A nutting-crook<sup>2</sup> in hand; and turned my steps  
Tow'rd some far-distant wood, a Figure quaint,  
Tricked out in proud disguise of cast-off weeds<sup>o</sup>  
Which for that service had been husbanded,  
10 By exhortation of my frugal Dame<sup>3</sup>—  
Motley accoutrement, of power to smile  
At thorns, and brakes,<sup>o</sup> and brambles,—and, in truth,  
More ragged than need was! O'er pathless rocks,  
Through beds of matted fern, and tangled thickets,  
15 Forcing my way, I came to one dear nook  
Unvisited, where not a broken bough  
Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign  
Of devastation; but the hazels rose  
Tall and erect, with tempting clusters hung,  
20 A virgin scene!—A little while I stood,  
Breathing with such suppression of the heart  
As joy delights in; and, with wise restraint  
Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed  
The banquet;—or beneath the trees I sate  
25 Among the flowers, and with the flowers I played;  
A temper known to those, who, after long  
And weary expectation, have been blest  
With sudden happiness beyond all hope.  
Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves

30 The violets of five seasons re-appear  
And fade, unseen by any human eye;  
Where fairy water-breaks<sup>4</sup> do murmur on  
For ever; and I saw the sparkling foam,  
And—with my cheek on one of those green stones  
35 That, fleeced with moss, under the shady trees,  
Lay round me, scattered like a flock of sheep—  
I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,  
In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay  
Tribute to ease; and, of its joy secure,  
40 The heart luxuriates with indifferent things,  
Wasting its kindness on stocks<sup>5</sup> and stones,  
And on the vacant air. Then up I rose,  
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with  
crash  
And merciless ravage: and the shady nook  
45 Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,  
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up  
Their quiet being: and, unless I now  
Confound my present feelings with the past,  
Ere from the mutilated bower I turned  
50 Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,  
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld  
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky.—  
Then, dearest Maiden,<sup>6</sup> move along these shades  
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand  
55 Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods.

1798

1800

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Wordsworth said in 1843 that these lines, written in Germany in 1798, were “intended as part of a poem on my own life [*The Prelude*], but struck out as not being wanted there.” He

published them in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Hooked stick used to shake tree branches and make nuts fall.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Ann Tyson, with whom Wordsworth lodged while at Hawkshead grammar school.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Places where the flow of a stream is broken by rocks.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Tree stumps. ("Stocks and stones" is a conventional expression for "inanimate things.")[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In a manuscript passage originally intended to lead up to "Nutting," the maiden is called Lucy.[Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *bag, knapsack*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *clothes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thickets of ferns*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Ruined Cottage<sup>1</sup>

## *First Part*

'Twas summer and the sun was mounted high.  
Along the south the uplands feebly glared  
Through a pale steam, and all the northern downs  
In clearer air ascending shewed far off  
5 Their surfaces with shadows dappled o'er  
Of deep embattled clouds: far as the sight  
Could reach those many shadows lay in spots  
Determined and unmoved, with steady beams  
Of clear and pleasant sunshine interposed;  
Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss  
10 Extends his careless limbs beside the root  
Of some huge oak whose aged branches make  
A twilight of their own, a dewy shade  
Where the wren warbles while the dreaming man,  
Half-conscious of that soothing melody,  
15 With side-long eye looks out upon the scene,  
By those impending branches made more soft,  
More soft and distant. Other lot was mine.  
Across a bare wide Common I had toiled  
With languid feet which by the slipp'ry ground  
20 Were baffled still, and when I stretched myself  
On the brown earth my limbs from very heat  
Could find no rest nor my weak arm disperse  
The insect host which gathered round my face  
And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise  
25 Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round.  
I rose and turned towards a group of trees  
Which midway in that level stood alone,

And thither come at length, beneath a shade  
Of clustering elms that sprang from the same root  
30 I found a ruined house, four naked walls  
That stared upon each other. I looked round  
And near the door I saw an aged Man,  
Alone, and stretched upon the cottage bench;  
An iron-pointed staff lay at his side.  
35 With instantaneous joy I recognized  
That pride of nature and of lowly life,  
The venerable Armitage, a friend  
As dear to me as is the setting sun.

Two days before  
40 We had been fellow-travellers. I knew  
That he was in this neighbourhood and now  
Delighted found him here in the cool shade.  
He lay, his pack of rustic merchandize  
Pillowing his head—I guess he had no thought  
45 Of his way-wandering life. His eyes were shut;  
The shadows of the breezy elms above  
Dappled his face. With thirsty heat oppress'd  
At length I hailed him, glad to see his hat  
Bedewed with water-drops, as if the brim  
50 Had newly scoop'd a running stream. He rose  
And pointing to a sun-flower bade me climb  
The [ ]<sup>2</sup> wall where that same gaudy flower  
Looked out upon the road. It was a plot  
Of garden-ground, now wild, its matted weeds  
55 Marked with the steps of those whom as they pass'd,  
The goose-berry trees that shot in long lank slips,  
Or currants hanging from their leafless stems  
In scanty strings, had tempted to o'erleap  
The broken wall. Within that cheerless spot,  
60 Where two tall hedgerows of thick willow boughs  
Joined in a damp cold nook, I found a well  
Half-choked [with willow flowers and weeds.]<sup>3</sup>

I slaked my thirst and to the shady bench  
Returned, and while I stood unbonneted  
65 To catch the motion of the cooler air  
The old Man said, "I see around me here  
Things which you cannot see: we die, my Friend,  
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved  
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth  
70 Dies with him or is changed, and very soon  
Even of the good is no memorial left.  
The Poets in their elegies and songs  
Lamenting the departed call the groves,  
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,  
75 And senseless<sup>4</sup> rocks, nor idly; for they speak  
In these their invocations with a voice  
Obedient to the strong creative power  
Of human passion. Sympathies there are  
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,  
80 That steal upon the meditative mind  
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood  
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
One sadness, they and I. For them a bond  
Of brotherhood is broken: time has been  
85 When every day the touch of human hand  
Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered  
To human comfort. When I stooped to drink,  
A spider's web hung to the water's edge,  
And on the wet and slimy foot-stone lay  
90 The useless fragment of a wooden bowl;  
It moved my very heart. The day has been  
When I could never pass this road but she  
Who lived within these walls, when I appeared,  
A daughter's welcome gave me, and I loved her  
95 As my own child. O Sir! the good die first,  
And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust  
Burn to the socket. Many a passenger<sup>o</sup>

Has blessed poor Margaret for her gentle looks  
When she upheld the cool refreshment drawn  
100 From that forsaken spring, and no one came  
But he was welcome, no one went away  
But that it seemed she loved him. She is dead,  
The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,  
Stripp'd of its outward garb of household flowers,  
105 Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind  
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked  
With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead,  
And nettles rot and adders sun themselves  
Where we have sate together while she nurs'd  
110 Her infant at her breast. The unshod Colt,  
The wandring heifer and the Potter's ass,  
Find shelter now within the chimney-wall  
Where I have seen her evening hearth-stone blaze  
And through the window spread upon the road  
115 Its chearful light.—You will forgive me, Sir,  
But often on this cottage do I muse  
As on a picture, till my wiser mind  
Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief.

She had a husband, an industrious man,  
120 Sober and steady; I have heard her say  
That he was up and busy at his loom  
In summer ere the mower's scythe had swept  
The dewy grass, and in the early spring  
Ere the last star had vanished. They who pass'd  
125 At evening, from behind the garden-fence  
Might hear his busy spade, which he would ply  
After his daily work till the day-light  
Was gone and every leaf and flower were lost  
In the dark hedges. So they pass'd their days  
130 In peace and comfort, and two pretty babes  
Were their best hope next to the God in Heaven.  
—You may remember, now some ten years gone,  
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left

135 With half a harvest.<sup>5</sup> It pleased heaven to add  
A worse affliction in the plague of war:  
A happy land was stricken to the heart;  
'Twas a sad time of sorrow and distress:  
A wanderer among the cottages,  
140 I with my pack of winter raiment saw  
The hardships of that season: many rich  
Sunk down as in a dream among the poor,  
And of the poor did many cease to be,  
And their place knew them not. Meanwhile, abridg'd<sup>o</sup>  
145 Of daily comforts, gladly reconciled  
To numerous self-denials, Margaret  
Went struggling on through those calamitous years  
With chearful hope: but ere the second autumn  
A fever seized her husband. In disease  
150 He lingered long, and when his strength returned  
He found the little he had stored to meet  
The hour of accident or crippling age  
Was all consumed. As I have said, 'twas now  
A time of trouble; shoals of artisans  
155 Were from their daily labour turned away  
To hang for bread on parish charity,<sup>6</sup>  
They and their wives and children—happier far  
Could they have lived as do the little birds  
That peck along the hedges or the kite  
That makes her dwelling in the mountain rocks.  
160 Ill fared it now with Robert, he who dwelt  
In this poor cottage; at his door he stood  
And whistled many a snatch of merry tunes  
That had no mirth in them, or with his knife  
Carved uncouth figures on the heads of sticks,  
165 Then idly sought about through every nook  
Of house or garden any casual task  
Of use or ornament, and with a strange,  
Amusing but uneasy novelty



170 He blended where he might the various tasks  
Of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring.  
But this endured not; his good-humour soon  
Became a weight in which no pleasure was,  
And poverty brought on a petted<sup>o</sup> mood  
And a sore temper: day by day he drooped,  
175 And he would leave his home, and to the town  
Without an errand would he turn his steps  
Or wander here and there among the fields.  
One while he would speak lightly of his babes  
And with a cruel tongue: at other times  
180 He played with them wild freaks of merriment:  
And 'twas a piteous thing to see the looks  
Of the poor innocent children. 'Every smile,'  
Said Margaret to me here beneath these trees,  
'Made my heart bleed.' " At this the old Man paus'd  
185 And looking up to those enormous elms  
He said, " 'Tis now the hour of deepest noon,  
At this still season of repose and peace,  
This hour when all things which are not at rest  
Are chearful, while this multitude of flies  
190 Fills all the air with happy melody,  
Why should a tear be in an old man's eye?  
Why should we thus with an untoward mind  
And in the weakness of humanity  
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,  
195 To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,  
And feeding on disquiet thus disturb  
The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts?"

#### END OF THE FIRST PART

### *Second Part*

He spake with somewhat of a solemn tone:  
But when he ended there was in his face

200 Such easy cheerfulness, a look so mild  
That for a little time it stole away  
All recollection, and that simple tale  
Passed from my mind like a forgotten sound.  
A while on trivial things we held discourse,  
205 To me soon tasteless. In my own despite  
I thought of that poor woman as of one  
Whom I had known and loved. He had rehearsed  
Her homely tale with such familiar power,  
210 With such a[n active]<sup>7</sup> countenance, an eye  
So busy, that the things of which he spake  
Seemed present, and, attention now relaxed,  
There was a heartfelt chillness in my veins.  
I rose, and turning from that breezy shade  
Went out into the open air and stood  
215 To drink the comfort of the warmer sun.  
Long time I had not stayed ere, looking round  
Upon that tranquil ruin, I returned  
And begged of the old man that for my sake  
He would resume his story. He replied,  
220 "It were a wantonness<sup>o</sup> and would demand  
Severe reproof, if we were men whose hearts  
Could hold vain dalliance with the misery  
Even of the dead, contented thence to draw  
A momentary pleasure never marked  
225 By reason, barren of all future good.  
But we have known that there is often found  
In mournful thoughts, and always might be found,  
A power to virtue friendly; were't not so,  
I am a dreamer among men, indeed  
230 An idle dreamer. 'Tis a common tale,  
By moving accidents<sup>8</sup> uncharactered,  
A tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed  
In bodily form, and to the grosser sense  
But ill adapted, scarcely palpable

235 To him who does not think. But at your bidding  
I will proceed.

While thus it fared with them  
To whom this cottage till that hapless year  
Had been a blessed home, it was my chance  
To travel in a country far remote,  
240 And glad I was when, halting by yon gate  
That leads from the green lane, again I saw  
These lofty elm-trees. Long I did not rest:  
With many pleasant thoughts I cheer'd my way  
O'er the flat common. At the door arrived,  
245 I knocked, and when I entered with the hope  
Of usual greeting, Margaret looked at me  
A little while, then turned her head away  
Speechless, and sitting down upon a chair  
Wept bitterly. I wist not what to do  
250 Or how to speak to her. Poor wretch! at last  
She rose from off her seat—and then, oh Sir!  
I cannot tell how she pronounced my name:  
With fervent love, and with a face of grief  
Unutterably helpless, and a look  
255 That seem'd to cling upon me, she enquir'd  
If I had seen her husband. As she spake  
A strange surprize and fear came to my heart,  
Nor had I power to answer ere she told  
That he had disappeared—just two months gone.  
260 He left his house; two wretched days had passed,  
And on the third by the first break of light,  
Within her casement full in view she saw  
A purse of gold.<sup>9</sup> 'I trembled at the sight,'  
Said Margaret, 'for I knew it was his hand  
265 That placed it there, and on that very day  
By one, a stranger, from my husband sent,  
The tidings came that he had joined a troop  
Of soldiers going to a distant land.

270 He left me thus—Poor Man! he had not heart  
To take a farewell of me, and he feared  
That I should follow with my babes, and sink  
Beneath the misery of a soldier's life.  
This tale did Margaret tell with many tears:  
And when she ended I had little power  
275 To give her comfort, and was glad to take  
Such words of hope from her own mouth as serv'd  
To cheer us both: but long we had not talked  
Ere we built up a pile of better thoughts,  
And with a brighter eye she looked around  
280 As if she had been shedding tears of joy.  
We parted. It was then the early spring;  
I left her busy with her garden tools;  
And well remember, o'er that fence she looked,  
And while I paced along the foot-way path  
285 Called out, and sent a blessing after me  
With tender cheerfulness and with a voice  
That seemed the very sound of happy thoughts.  
I roved o'er many a hill and many a dale  
With this my weary load, in heat and cold,  
290 Through many a wood, and many an open ground,  
In sunshine or in shade, in wet or fair,  
Now blithe, now drooping, as it might befall,  
My best companions now the driving winds  
And now the 'trotting brooks'<sup>1</sup> and whispering trees  
295 And now the music of my own sad steps,  
With many a short-lived thought that pass'd between  
And disappeared. I came this way again  
Towards the wane of summer, when the wheat  
Was yellow, and the soft and bladed grass  
300 Sprang up afresh and o'er the hay-field spread  
Its tender green. When I had reached the door  
I found that she was absent. In the shade  
Where now we sit I waited her return.

Her cottage in its outward look appeared  
305 As chearful as before; in any shew  
Of neatness little changed, but that I thought  
The honeysuckle crowded round the door  
And from the wall hung down in heavier wreathes,  
310 And knots of worthless stone-crop<sup>2</sup> started out  
Along the window's edge, and grew like weeds  
Against the lower panes. I turned aside  
And stroll'd into her garden.—It was chang'd:  
The unprofitable bindweed spread his bells  
315 From side to side and with unwieldy wreaths  
Had dragg'd the rose from its sustaining wall  
And bent it down to earth; the border-tufts—  
Daisy and thrift and lowly camomile  
And thyme—had straggled out into the paths  
Which they were used<sup>o</sup> to deck. Ere this an hour  
320 Was wasted. Back I turned my restless steps,  
And as I walked before the door it chanced  
A stranger passed, and guessing whom I sought  
He said that she was used to ramble far.  
The sun was sinking in the west, and now  
325 I sate with sad impatience. From within  
Her solitary infant cried aloud.  
The spot though fair seemed very desolate,  
The longer I remained more desolate.  
And, looking round, I saw the corner-stones,  
330 Till then unmark'd, on either side the door  
With dull red stains discoloured and stuck o'er  
With tufts and hairs of wool, as if the sheep  
That feed upon the commons<sup>3</sup> thither came  
Familiarly and found a couching-place  
335 Even at her threshold.—The house-clock struck  
eight;  
I turned and saw her distant a few steps.  
Her face was pale and thin, her figure too

Was chang'd. As she unlocked the door she said,  
340 'It grieves me you have waited here so long,  
But in good truth I've wandered much of late  
And sometimes, to my shame I speak, have need  
Of my best prayers to bring me back again.'  
While on the board she spread our evening meal  
She told me she had lost her elder child,  
345 That he for months had been a serving-boy  
Apprenticed by the parish. 'I perceive  
You look at me, and you have cause. Today  
I have been travelling far, and many days  
About the fields I wander, knowing this  
350 Only, that what I seek I cannot find.  
And so I waste my time: for I am changed;  
And to myself,' said she, 'have done much wrong,  
And to this helpless infant. I have slept  
Weeping, and weeping I have waked; my tears  
355 Have flow'd as if my body were not such  
As others are, and I could never die.  
But I am now in mind and in my heart  
More easy, and I hope,' said she, 'that heaven  
Will give me patience to endure the things  
360 Which I behold at home.' It would have grieved  
Your very heart to see her. Sir, I feel  
The story linger in my heart. I fear  
'Tis long and tedious, but my spirit clings  
To that poor woman: so familiarly  
365 Do I perceive her manner, and her look  
And presence, and so deeply do I feel  
Her goodness, that not seldom in my walks  
A momentary trance comes over me;  
And to myself I seem to muse on one  
370 By sorrow laid asleep or borne away,  
A human being destined to awake  
To human life, or something very near  
To human life, when he shall come again

For whom she suffered. Sir, it would have griev'd  
Your very soul to see her: evermore  
Her eye-lids droop'd, her eyes were downward cast;  
And when she at her table gave me food  
She did not look at me. Her voice was low,  
Her body was subdued. In every act  
Pertaining to her house-affairs appeared  
The careless stillness which a thinking mind  
Gives to an idle matter—still she sighed,  
But yet no motion of the breast was seen,  
No heaving of the heart. While by the fire  
We sate together, sighs came on my ear;  
I knew not how, and hardly whence they came.  
I took my staff, and when I kissed her babe  
The tears stood in her eyes. I left her then  
With the best hope and comfort I could give;  
She thanked me for my will, but for my hope  
It seemed she did not thank me.

I returned  
And took my rounds along this road again  
Ere on its sunny bank the primrose flower  
Had chronicled the earliest day of spring.  
395 I found her sad and drooping; she had learn'd  
No tidings of her husband: if he lived  
She knew not that he lived; if he were dead  
She knew not he was dead. She seemed the same  
In person [or]<sup>4</sup> appearance, but her house  
400 Bespoke a sleepy hand of negligence;  
The floor was neither dry nor neat, the hearth  
Was comfortless [    ],  
The windows too were dim, and her few books,  
Which, one upon the other, heretofore  
405 Had been piled up against the corner-panes  
In seemingly order, now with straggling leaves  
Lay scattered here and there, open or shut

As they had chanced to fall. Her infant babe  
Had from its mother caught the trick of grief  
410 And sighed among its playthings. Once again  
I turned towards the garden-gate and saw  
More plainly still that poverty and grief  
Were now come nearer to her: the earth was hard,  
With weeds defaced and knots of withered grass;  
415 No ridges there appeared of clear black mould,  
No winter greenness; of her herbs and flowers  
It seemed the better part were gnawed away  
Or trampled on the earth; a chain of straw  
Which had been twisted round the tender stem  
420 Of a young apple-tree lay at its root;  
The bark was nibbled round by truant sheep.  
Margaret stood near, her infant in her arms,  
And seeing that my eye was on the tree  
She said, 'I fear it will be dead and gone  
425 Ere Robert come again.' Towards the house  
Together we returned, and she inquired  
If I had any hope. But for her Babe  
And for her little friendless Boy, she said,  
She had no wish to live, that she must die  
430 Of sorrow. Yet I saw the idle loom  
Still in its place. His Sunday garments hung  
Upon the self-same nail, his very staff  
Stood undisturbed behind the door. And when  
I passed this way beaten by Autumn winds  
435 She told me that her little babe was dead  
And she was left alone. That very time,  
I yet remember, through the miry lane  
She walked with me a mile, when the bare trees  
Trickled with foggy damps, and in such sort  
440 That any heart had ached to hear her begg'd  
That wheresoe'er I went I still would ask  
For him whom she had lost. We parted then,  
Our final parting, for from that time forth



445 Did many seasons pass ere I returned  
Into this tract again.

Five tedious years  
She lingered in unquiet widowhood,  
A wife and widow. Needs must it have been  
A sore heart-wasting. I have heard, my friend,  
That in that broken harbour she would sit  
450 The idle length of half a sabbath day—  
There, where you see the toadstool's lazy head—  
And when a dog passed by she still would quit  
The shade and look abroad. On this old Bench  
For hours she sate, and evermore her eye  
455 Was busy in the distance, shaping things  
Which made her heart beat quick. Seest thou that  
path?

(The green-sward now has broken its grey line)  
There to and fro she paced through many a day  
Of the warm summer, from a belt of flax  
460 That girt her waist spinning the long-drawn thread  
With backward steps.—Yet ever as there passed  
A man whose garments shewed the Soldier's red,  
Or crippled Mendicant in Sailor's garb,  
The little child who sate to turn the wheel  
465 Ceased from his toil, and she with faltering voice,  
Expecting still to learn her husband's fate,  
Made many a fond inquiry; and when they  
Whose presence gave no comfort were gone by,  
Her heart was still more sad. And by yon gate  
470 Which bars the traveller's road she often stood  
And when a stranger horseman came, the latch  
Would lift, and in his face look wistfully,  
Most happy if from aught discovered there  
Of tender feeling she might dare repeat  
475 The same sad question. Meanwhile her poor hut  
Sunk to decay, for he was gone whose hand  
At the first nippings of October frost

Closed up each chink and with fresh bands of straw  
Chequered the green-grown thatch. And so she lived  
480 Through the long winter, reckless and alone,  
Till this reft house by frost, and thaw, and rain  
Was sapped; and when she slept the nightly damp  
Did chill her breast, and in the stormy day  
Her tattered clothes were ruffled by the wind  
485 Even at the side of her own fire. Yet still  
She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds  
Have parted hence; and still that length of road  
And this rude bench one torturing hope endeared,  
Fast rooted at her heart, and here, my friend,  
490 In sickness she remained, and here she died,  
Last human tenant of these ruined walls."

The old Man ceased: he saw that I was mov'd;  
From that low Bench, rising instinctively,  
I turned aside in weakness, nor had power  
495 To thank him for the tale which he had told.  
I stood, and leaning o'er the garden-gate  
Reviewed that Woman's suff'rings, and it seemed  
To comfort me while with a brother's love  
I blessed her in the impotence of grief.  
500 At length [towards] the [Cottage I returned]<sup>5</sup>  
Fondly, and traced with milder interest  
That secret spirit of humanity  
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies  
Of nature, 'mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers,  
505 And silent overgrowings, still survived.  
The old man, seeing this, resumed and said,  
"My Friend, enough to sorrow have you given,  
The purposes of wisdom ask no more;  
Be wise and chearful, and no longer read  
510 The forms of things with an unworthy eye.  
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.  
I well remember that those very plumes,

Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,  
 By mist and silent rain-drops silver'd o'er,  
 515 As once I passed did to my heart convey  
 So still an image of tranquillity,  
 So calm and still, and looked so beautiful  
 Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,  
 That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
 520 From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
 The passing shews of being leave behind,  
 Appeared an idle dream that could not live  
 Where meditation was. I turned away  
 And walked along my road in happiness."  
 525 He ceased. By this the sun declining shot  
 A slant and mellow radiance which began  
 To fall upon us where beneath the trees  
 We sate on that low bench, and now we felt,  
 Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on.  
 530 A linnet warbled from those lofty elms,  
 A thrush sang loud, and other melodies,  
 At distance heard, peopled the milder air.  
 The old man rose and hoisted up his load.  
 Together casting then a farewell look  
 535 Upon those silent walls, we left the shade  
 And ere the stars were visible attained  
 A rustic inn, our evening resting-place.

THE END

1797–ca. 1799

1949

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Wordsworth wrote *The Ruined Cottage* in 1797–98, then revised it several times before he finally published an expanded version of the story as book 1 of *The Excursion*, in 1814. *The Ruined Cottage* was not published as an independent poem until 1949, when it appeared in the fifth volume of *The*

*Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, who printed a version known as "MS. B." The text reprinted here is from "MS. D," dated 1799, as transcribed by James Butler in the Cornell Wordsworth volume, "*The Ruined Cottage*" and "*The Pedlar*" (1979).[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The brackets here and in later lines mark blank spaces left unfilled in the manuscript.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Wordsworth penciled the bracketed phrase into a gap left in the manuscript.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Incapable of sensation or perception.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: As James Butler points out in his introduction to the Cornell Wordsworth edition, Wordsworth is purposely distancing his story in time. The "two blighting seasons" in fact occurred in 1794–95, only a few years before Wordsworth wrote *The Ruined Cottage*, when a bad harvest was followed by one of the worst winters on record. Much of the seed grain was destroyed in the ground, and the price of wheat nearly doubled.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The so-called able-bodied poor were entitled to receive from the parish in which they were settled the food, the clothing, and sometimes the cash that would help them over a crisis.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Wordsworth penciled the bracketed phrase into a gap left in the manuscript.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Othello speaks "of most disastrous chances, / Of moving accidents by flood and field, / Of hairbreadth 'scapes" (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.3.133–35).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The "bounty" that her husband had been paid for enlisting in the militia. The shortage of volunteers and England's sharply rising military needs had in some counties forced the bounty up from about £1 in 1757 to more than £16 in 1796 (J. R. Western, *English Militia in the Eighteenth Century*, 1965).[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: From Robert Burns ("To William Simpson," line 87).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A plant with yellow flowers that grows on walls and rocks.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Land belonging to the local community as a whole.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The word *or* was erased here; later manuscripts read "and."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The words inside the brackets were added in MS. E.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *passerby, traveler*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *deprived*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ill-tempered*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *reckless ill-doing*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *accustomed*[Return to reference °](#)

# Michael<sup>1</sup>

## *A Pastoral Poem*

If from the public way you turn your steps  
Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Ghyll,<sup>2</sup>  
You will suppose that with an upright path  
Your feet must struggle; in such bold ascent  
5 The pastoral mountains front you, face to face.  
But, courage! for around that boisterous brook  
The mountains have all opened out themselves,  
And made a hidden valley of their own.  
No habitation can be seen; but they  
Who journey thither find themselves alone  
10 With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites<sup>o</sup>  
That overhead are sailing in the sky.  
It is in truth an utter solitude;  
Nor should I have made mention of this Dell  
But for one object which you might pass by,  
15 Might see and notice not. Beside the brook  
Appears a straggling heap of unhewn stones!  
And to that simple object appertains  
A story—unenriched with strange events,  
Yet not unfit, I deem, for the fireside,  
20 Or for the summer shade. It was the first  
Of those domestic tales that spake to me  
Of Shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men  
Whom I already loved;—not verily  
For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills  
25 Where was their occupation and abode.  
And hence this Tale, while I was yet a Boy  
Careless of books, yet having felt the power

Of Nature, by the gentle agency  
Of natural objects, led me on to feel  
30 For passions that were not my own, and think  
(At random and imperfectly indeed)  
On man, the heart of man, and human life.  
Therefore, although it be a history  
Homely and rude, I will relate the same  
35 For the delight of a few natural hearts;  
And, with yet fonder feeling, for the sake  
Of youthful Poets, who among these hills  
Will be my second self when I am gone.

40 Upon the forest-side in Grasmere Vale  
There dwelt a Shepherd, Michael was his name;  
An old man, stout of heart, and strong of limb.  
His bodily frame had been from youth to age  
Of an unusual strength: his mind was keen,  
Intense, and frugal, apt for all affairs,  
45 And in his shepherd's calling he was prompt  
And watchful more than ordinary men.  
Hence had he learned the meaning of all winds,  
Of blasts of every tone; and, oftentimes,  
When others heeded not, he heard the South<sup>o</sup>  
50 Make subterraneous music, like the noise  
Of bagpipers on distant Highland hills.  
The Shepherd, at such warning, of his flock  
Bethought him, and he to himself would say,  
"The winds are now devising work for me!"  
55 And, truly, at all times, the storm, that drives  
The traveller to a shelter, summoned him  
Up to the mountains: he had been alone  
Amid the heart of many thousand mists,  
That came to him, and left him, on the heights.  
60 So lived he till his eightieth year was past.  
And grossly that man errs, who should suppose  
That the green valleys, and the streams and rocks,

Were things indifferent to the Shepherd's thoughts.  
Fields, where with cheerful spirits he had breathed  
65 The common air; hills, which with vigorous step  
He had so often climbed; which had impressed  
So many incidents upon his mind  
Of hardship, skill or courage, joy or fear;  
Which, like a book, preserved the memory  
70 Of the dumb animals, whom he had saved,  
Had fed or sheltered, linking to such acts  
The certainty of honourable gain;  
Those fields, those hills—what could they less? had  
laid  
Strong hold on his affections, were to him  
75 A pleasurable feeling of blind love,  
The pleasure which there is in life itself.

His days had not been passed in singleness.  
His Helpmate was a comely matron, old—  
Though younger than himself full twenty years.  
80 She was a woman of a stirring life,  
Whose heart was in her house: two wheels she had  
Of antique form; this large, for spinning wool;  
That small, for flax; and if one wheel had rest,  
It was because the other was at work.  
85 The Pair had but one inmate in their house,  
An only Child, who had been born to them  
When Michael, telling o o'er his years, began  
To deem that he was old,—in shepherd's phrase,  
With one foot in the grave. This only Son,  
90 With two brave sheep-dogs tried o in many a storm,  
The one of an inestimable worth,  
Made all their household. I may truly say,  
That they were as a proverb in the vale  
For endless industry. When day was gone,  
95 And from their occupations out of doors  
The Son and Father were come home, even then,



100 Their labour did not cease; unless when all  
Turned to the cleanly supper-board, and there,  
Each with a mess of pottage and skimmed milk,  
Sat round the basket piled with oaten cakes,  
And their plain home-made cheese. Yet when the  
meal

Was ended, Luke (for so the Son was named)  
And his old Father both betook themselves  
To such convenient work as might employ  
105 Their hands by the fire-side; perhaps to card  
Wool for the Housewife's spindle, or repair  
Some injury done to sickle, flail, or scythe,  
Or other implement of house or field.

110 Down from the ceiling, by the chimney's edge,  
That in our ancient uncouth country style  
With huge and black projection overbrowed  
Large space beneath, as duly as the light  
Of day grew dim the Housewife hung a l  
An aged utensil, which had performed  
115 Service beyond all others of its kind.

Early at evening did it burn—and late,  
Surviving comrade of uncounted hours,  
Which, going by from year to year, had found,  
And left the couple neither gay perhaps  
120 Nor cheerful, yet with objects and with hopes,  
Living a life of eager industry.  
And now, when Luke had reached his eighteenth  
year,

There by the light of his old lamp they sate,  
Father and Son, while far into the night  
125 The Housewife plied her own peculiar work,  
Making the cottage through the silent hours  
Murmur as with the sound of summer flies.  
This light was famous in its neighbourhood,  
And was a public symbol of the life

130 That thrifty Pair had lived. For, as it chanced,  
Their cottage on a plot of rising ground  
Stood single, with large prospect, north and south,  
High into Easedale, up to Dunmail-Raise,  
135 And westward to the village near the lake;  
And from this constant light, so regular  
And so far seen, the House itself, by all  
Who dwelt within the limits of the vale,  
Both old and young, was named THE EVENING STAR.

140 Thus living on through such a length of years,  
The Shepherd, if he loved himself, must needs  
Have loved his Helpmate; but to Michael's heart  
This son of his old age was yet more dear—  
Less from instinctive tenderness, the same  
Fond spirit that blindly works in the blood of all—  
145 Than that a child, more than all other gifts  
That earth can offer to declining man,  
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts,  
And stirrings of inquietude, when they  
By tendency of nature needs must fail.  
150 Exceeding was the love he bare to him,  
His heart and his heart's joy! For oftentimes  
Old Michael, while he was a babe in arms,  
Had done him female service, not alone  
For pastime and delight, as is the use  
155 Of fathers, but with patient mind enforced  
To acts of tenderness; and he had rocked  
His cradle, as with a woman's gentle hand.

And, in a later time, ere yet the Boy  
160 Had put on boy's attire, did Michael love,  
Albeit of a stern unbending mind,  
To have the Young-one in his sight, when he  
Wrought in the field, or on his shepherd's stool  
Sate with a fettered sheep before him stretched

165 Under the large old oak, that near his door  
Stood single, and, from matchless depth of shade,  
Chosen for the Shearer's covert from the sun,  
Thence in our rustic dialect was called  
The CLIPPING TREE, a name which yet it bears.  
170 There, while they two were sitting in the shade,  
With others round them, earnest all and blithe,  
Would Michael exercise his heart with looks  
Of fond correction and reproof bestowed  
Upon the Child, if he disturbed the sheep  
By catching at their legs, or with his shouts  
175 Scared them, while they lay still beneath the shears.

And when by Heaven's good grace the boy grew  
up  
A healthy Lad, and carried in his cheek  
Two steady roses that were five years old;  
Then Michael from a winter coppice<sup>3</sup> cut  
180 With his own hand a sapling, which he hooped  
With iron, making it throughout in all  
Due requisites a perfect shepherd's staff,  
And gave it to the Boy; wherewith equipt  
He as a watchman oftentimes was placed  
185 At gate or gap, to stem or turn the flock;  
And, to his office prematurely called,  
There stood the urchin, as you will divine,  
Something between a hindrance and a help;  
And for this cause not always, I believe,  
190 Receiving from his Father hire<sup>o</sup> of praise;  
Though nought was left undone which staff, or voice,  
Or looks, or threatening gestures, could perform.

But soon as Luke, full ten years old, could stand  
195 Against the mountain blasts; and to the heights,  
Not fearing toil, nor length of weary ways,  
He with his Father daily went, and they

Were as companions, why should I relate  
That objects which the Shepherd loved before  
Were dearer now? that from the Boy there came  
200 Feelings and emanations—things which were  
Light to the sun and music to the wind;  
And that the old Man's heart seemed born again?

Thus in his father's sight the Boy grew up:  
And now, when he had reached his eighteenth year,  
205 He was his comfort and his daily hope.

While in this sort the simple household lived  
From day to day, to Michael's ear there came  
Distressful tidings. Long before the time  
Of which I speak, the Shepherd had been bound  
210 In surety for his brother's son, a man  
Of an industrious life, and ample means;  
But unforeseen misfortunes suddenly  
Had prest upon him; and old Michael now  
Was summoned to discharge the forfeiture,  
215 A grievous penalty, but little less  
Than half his substance.<sup>4</sup> This unlooked-for claim,  
At the first hearing, for a moment took  
More hope out of his life than he supposed  
That any old man ever could have lost.  
220 As soon as he had armed himself with strength  
To look his trouble in the face, it seemed  
The Shepherd's sole resource to sell at once  
A portion of his patrimonial fields.  
Such was his first resolve; he thought again,  
225 And his heart failed him. "Isabel," said he,  
Two evenings after he had heard the news,  
"I have been toiling more than seventy years,  
And in the open sunshine of God's love  
Have we all lived; yet if these fields of ours  
230 Should pass into a stranger's hand, I think

That I could not lie quiet in my grave.  
Our lot is a hard lot; the sun himself  
Has scarcely been more diligent than I;  
And I have lived to be a fool at last  
235 To my own family. An evil man  
That was, and made an evil choice, if he  
Were false to us; and if he were not false,  
There are ten thousand to whom loss like this  
Had been no sorrow. I forgive him;—but  
240 'Twere better to be dumb than to talk thus.

“When I began, my purpose was to speak  
Of remedies and of a cheerful hope.  
Our Luke shall leave us, Isabel; the land  
Shall not go from us, and it shall be free;<sup>o</sup>  
245 He shall possess it, free as is the wind  
That passes over it. We have, thou know'st,  
Another kinsman—he will be our friend  
In this distress. He is a prosperous man,  
Thriving in trade—and Luke to him shall go,  
250 And with his kinsman's help and his own thrift  
He quickly will repair this loss, and then  
He may return to us. If here he stay,  
What can be done? Where every one is poor,  
What can be gained?”

At this the old Man paused,  
255 And Isabel sat silent, for her mind  
Was busy, looking back into past times.  
There's Richard Bateman,<sup>5</sup> thought she to herself,  
He was a parish-boy<sup>6</sup>—at the church-door  
They made a gathering for him, shillings, pence  
260 And halfpennies, wherewith the neighbours bought  
A basket, which they filled with pedlar's wares;  
And, with this basket on his arm, the lad  
Went up to London, found a master<sup>o</sup> there,

265 Who, out of many, chose the trusty boy  
To go and overlook his merchandise  
Beyond the seas; where he grew wondrous rich,  
And left estates and monies to the poor,  
And, at his birth-place, built a chapel floored  
270 With marble, which he sent from foreign lands.  
These thoughts, and many others of like sort,  
Passed quickly through the mind of Isabel,  
And her face brightened. The old Man was glad,  
And thus resumed:—"Well, Isabel! this scheme  
275 These two days, has been meat and drink to me.  
Far more than we have lost is left us yet.  
—We have enough—I wish indeed that I  
Were younger;—but this hope is a good hope.  
Make ready Luke's best garments, of the best  
Buy for him more, and let us send him forth  
280 To-morrow, or the next day, or to-night:  
—If he *could* go, the Boy should go to-night."

Here Michael ceased, and to the fields went forth  
With a light heart. The Housewife for five days  
285 Was restless morn and night, and all day long  
Wrought on with her best fingers to prepare  
Things needful for the journey of her son.  
But Isabel was glad when Sunday came  
To stop her in her work: for, when she lay  
By Michael's side, she through the last two nights  
290 Heard him, how he was troubled in his sleep:  
And when they rose at morning she could see  
That all his hopes were gone. That day at noon  
She said to Luke, while they two by themselves  
Were sitting at the door, "Thou must not go:  
295 We have no other Child but thee to lose,  
None to remember—do not go away,  
For if thou leave thy Father he will die."  
The Youth made answer with a jocund voice;

300 And Isabel, when she had told her fears,  
Recovered heart. That evening her best fare  
Did she bring forth, and all together sat  
Like happy people round a Christmas fire.

With daylight Isabel resumed her work;  
And all the ensuing week the house appeared  
305 As cheerful as a grove in Spring: at length  
The expected letter from their kinsman came,  
With kind assurances that he would do  
His utmost for the welfare of the Boy;  
To which, requests were added, that forthwith  
310 He might be sent to him. Ten times or more  
The letter was read over; Isabel  
Went forth to show it to the neighbours round;  
Nor was there at that time on English land  
A prouder heart than Luke's. When Isabel  
315 Had to her house returned, the old Man said,  
"He shall depart to-morrow." To this word  
The Housewife answered, talking much of things  
Which, if at such short notice he should go,  
Would surely be forgotten. But at length  
320 She gave consent, and Michael was at ease.

Near the tumultuous brook of Green-head Ghyll,  
In that deep valley, Michael had designed  
To build a Sheep-fold;<sup>7</sup> and, before he heard  
The tidings of his melancholy loss,  
325 For this same purpose he had gathered up  
A heap of stones, which by the streamlet's edge  
Lay thrown together, ready for the work.  
With Luke that evening thitherward he walked:  
And soon as they had reached the place he stopped,  
330 And thus the old Man spake to him:—"My Son,  
To-morrow thou wilt leave me: with full heart  
I look upon thee, for thou art the same

That wert a promise to me ere thy birth,  
And all thy life hast been my daily joy.  
335 I will relate to thee some little part  
Of our two histories; 'twill do thee good  
When thou art from me, even if I should touch  
On things thou canst not know of.—————After  
thou  
First cam'st into the world—as oft befalls  
340 To new-born infants—thou didst sleep away  
Two days, and blessings from thy Father's tongue  
Then fell upon thee. Day by day passed on,  
And still I loved thee with increasing love.  
Never to living ear came sweeter sounds  
345 Than when I heard thee by our own fire-side  
First uttering, without words, a natural tune;  
While thou, a feeding babe, didst in thy joy  
Sing at thy Mother's breast. Month followed month,  
And in the open fields my life was passed  
350 And on the mountains; else I think that thou  
Hadst been brought up upon thy Father's knees.  
But we were playmates, Luke: among these hills,  
As well thou knowest, in us the old and young  
Have played together, nor with me didst thou  
355 Lack any pleasure which a boy can know."  
Luke had a manly heart; but at these words  
He sobbed aloud. The old Man grasped his hand,  
And said, "Nay, do not take it so—I see  
That these are things of which I need not speak.  
360 —Even to the utmost I have been to thee  
A kind and a good Father: and herein  
I but repay a gift which I myself  
Received at others' hands; for, though now old  
Beyond the common life of man, I still  
365 Remember them who loved me in my youth.  
Both of them sleep together: here they lived,  
As all their Forefathers had done; and when



At length their time was come, they were not loth  
To give their bodies to the family mould.°  
370 I wished that thou should'st live the life they lived:  
But, 'tis a long time to look back, my Son,  
And see so little gain from threescore years.  
These fields were burthened° when they came to  
me;  
Till I was forty years of age, not more  
375 Than half of my inheritance was mine.  
I toiled and toiled; God blessed me in my work,  
And till these three weeks past the land was free.  
—It looks as if it never could endure  
Another Master. Heaven forgive me, Luke,  
380 If I judge ill for thee, but it seems good  
That thou should'st go."

At this the old Man paused;  
Then, pointing to the stones near which they stood,  
Thus, after a short silence, he resumed:  
"This was a work for us; and now, my Son,  
385 It is a work for me. But, lay one stone—  
Here, lay it for me, Luke, with thine own hands.  
Nay, Boy, be of good hope;—we both may live  
To see a better day. At eighty-four  
I still am strong and hale;—do thou thy part;  
390 I will do mine.—I will begin again  
With many tasks that were resigned to thee:  
Up to the heights, and in among the storms,  
Will I without thee go again, and do  
All works which I was wont to do alone,  
395 Before I knew thy face.—Heaven bless thee, Boy!  
Thy heart these two weeks has been beating fast  
With many hopes; it should be so—yes—yes—  
I knew that thou could'st never have a wish  
To leave me, Luke: thou hast been bound to me  
400 Only by links of love: when thou art gone,  
What will be left to us!—But, I forget

My purposes. Lay now the corner-stone,  
As I requested; and hereafter, Luke,  
When thou art gone away, should evil men  
405 Be thy companions, think of me, my Son,  
And of this moment; hither turn thy thoughts,  
And God will strengthen thee: amid all fear  
And all temptation, Luke, I pray that thou  
May'st bear in mind the life thy Fathers lived,  
410 Who, being innocent, did for that cause  
Bestir them in good deeds. Now, fare thee well—  
When thou return'st, thou in this place wilt see  
A work which is not here: a covenant  
'Twill be between us; but, whatever fate  
415 Befal thee, I shall love thee to the last,  
And bear thy memory with me to the grave."

The Shepherd ended here; and Luke stooped  
down,  
And, as his Father had requested, laid  
The first stone of the Sheep-fold. At the sight  
420 The old Man's grief broke from him; to his heart  
He pressed his Son, he kissèd him and wept;  
And to the house together they returned.  
—Hushed was that House in peace, or seeming  
peace,  
Ere the night fell:—with morrow's dawn the Boy  
425 Began his journey, and when he had reached  
The public way, he put on a bold face;  
And all the neighbours, as he passed their doors,  
Came forth with wishes and with farewell prayers,  
That followed him till he was out of sight.  
430

A good report did from their Kinsman come,  
Of Luke and his well-doing: and the Boy  
Wrote loving letters, full of wondrous news,

Which, as the Housewife phrased it, were  
throughout

435 "The prettiest letters that were ever seen."  
Both parents read them with rejoicing hearts.  
So, many months passed on: and once again  
The Shepherd went about his daily work  
With confident and cheerful thoughts; and now  
440 Sometimes when he could find a leisure hour  
He to that valley took his way, and there  
Wrought at the Sheep-fold. Meantime Luke began  
To slacken in his duty; and, at length,  
He in the dissolute city gave himself  
445 To evil courses: ignominy and shame  
Fell on him, so that he was driven at last  
To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas.

There is a comfort in the strength of love;  
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else  
Would upset the brain, or break the heart:  
450 I have conversed with more than one who well  
Remember the old Man, and what he was  
Years after he had heard this heavy news.  
His bodily frame had been from youth to age  
Of an unusual strength. Among the rocks  
455 He went, and still looked up to sun and cloud,  
And listened to the wind; and, as before  
Performed all kinds of labour for his sheep,  
And for the land, his small inheritance.  
And to that hollow dell from time to time  
460 Did he repair, to build the Fold of which  
His flock had need. 'Tis not forgotten yet  
The pity which was then in every heart  
For the old Man—and 'tis believed by all  
465 That many and many a day he thither went,  
And never lifted up a single stone.

There, by the Sheep-fold, sometimes was he seen  
 Sitting alone, or with his faithful Dog,  
 Then old, beside him, lying at his feet.  
 The length of full seven years, from time to time,  
 470 He at the building of this Sheep-fold wrought,  
 And left the work unfinished when he died.  
 Three years, or little more, did Isabel  
 Survive her Husband: at her death the estate  
 Was sold, and went into a stranger's hand.  
 475 The Cottage which was named THE EVENING STAR  
 Is gone—the ploughshare has been through the  
 ground  
 On which it stood;<sup>8</sup> great changes have been  
 wrought  
 In all the neighbourhood:—yet the oak is left  
 That grew beside their door; and the remains  
 480 Of the unfinished Sheep-fold may be seen  
 Beside the boisterous brook of Green-head Ghyll.

Oct. 11–Dec. 9, 1800

1800, 1836

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

This poem is founded on the actual misfortunes of a family at Grasmere. For the account of the sheepfold, see Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, October 11, 1800 (pp. 437–38 in this volume). Wordsworth wrote to Thomas Poole, on April 9, 1801, that he had attempted to picture a man “agitated by two of the most powerful affections of the human heart; the parental affection, and the love of property, *landed* property, including the feelings of inheritance, home, and personal and family independence.” In another letter, sent, along with a copy of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, January 14, 1801, to Charles James Fox, the leader of the opposition in

### [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: A ravine forming the bed of a stream. Greenhead Ghyll is not far from Wordsworth's cottage at Grasmere. The other places named in the poem are also in that vicinity.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Grove of small trees.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Michael has guaranteed a loan for his nephew and now has lost the collateral, which amounts to half his financial worth.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The story alluded to here is well known in the country. The chapel is called Ings Chapel and is on the road leading from Kendal to Ambleside [*Wordsworth's note*, 1802–05].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A poor boy supported financially by the poor rates (taxes) paid out by the wealthier members of his parish.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A sheepfold [pen for sheep] in these mountains is an unroofed building of stone walls, with different divisions [*Wordsworth's note*, 1802–05].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The land on which Michael's sheep had grazed has been turned over to cultivation.[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *hawks*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *south wind*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *counting*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tested*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wages*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unmortgaged*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *employer*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *grave plot*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mortgaged*[Return to reference °](#)

# Resolution and Independence<sup>1</sup>

## 1

There was a roaring in the wind all night;  
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;  
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;  
The birds are singing in the distant woods;  
5 Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;  
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;  
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

## 2

All things that love the sun are out of doors;  
The sky rejoices in the morning's birth;  
10 The grass is bright with rain-drops;—on the moors  
The hare is running races in her mirth;  
And with her feet she from the plashy earth  
Raises a mist; that, glittering in the sun,  
Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run.

## 3

15 I was a Traveller then upon the moor;  
I saw the hare that raced about with joy;  
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;  
Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:  
The pleasant season did my heart employ:  
20 My old remembrances went from me wholly;  
And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

#### 4

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might  
Of joy in minds that can no further go,  
As high as we have mounted in delight  
In our dejection do we sink as low;  
25 To me that morning did it happen so;  
And fears and fancies thick upon me came;  
Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor  
could name.

#### 5

I heard the sky-lark warbling in the sky;  
And I bethought me of the playful hare:  
30 Even such a happy Child of earth am I;  
Even as these blissful creatures do I fare;  
Far from the world I walk, and from all care;  
But there may come another day to me—  
Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.  
35

#### 6

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,  
As if life's business were a summer mood;  
As if all needful things would come unsought  
To genial<sup>o</sup> faith, still rich in genial good;  
But how can He expect that others should  
40 Build for him, sow for him, and at his call  
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?

#### 7

I thought of Chatterton,<sup>2</sup> the marvellous Boy,  
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;

45 Of Him<sup>3</sup> who walked in glory and in joy  
Following his plough, along the mountain-side:  
By our own spirits are we deified:  
We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;  
But thereof come in the end despondency and  
madness.

## 8

50 Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,  
A leading from above, a something given,  
Yet it befel, that, in this lonely place,  
When I with these untoward thoughts had striven,  
Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven  
I saw a Man before me unawares:  
55 The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey  
hairs.

## 9

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie  
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;  
Wonder to all who do the same espy,  
By what means it could thither come, and whence;  
60 So that it seems a thing endued with sense:  
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf  
Of rock or sand repositeth, there to sun itself;

## 10

Such seemed this Man,<sup>4</sup> not all alive nor dead,  
Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age:  
65 His body was bent double, feet and head  
Coming together in life's pilgrimage;  
As if some dire constraint of pain, or rage



Of sickness felt by him in times long past,  
A more than human weight upon his frame had cast.

## 11

Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face,  
Upon a long grey staff of shaven wood:  
And, still as I drew near with gentle pace,  
Upon the margin of that moorish flood  
Motionless as a cloud the old Man stood,  
That heareth not the loud winds when they call;  
And moveth all together, if it move at all.

## 12

At length, himself unsettling, he the pond  
Stirred with his staff, and fixedly did look  
Upon the muddy water, which he conned,  
As if he had been reading in a book:  
And now a stranger's privilege I took;  
And, drawing to his side, to him did say,  
"This morning gives us promise of a glorious day."

## 13

A gentle answer did the old Man make,  
In courteous speech which forth he slowly drew:  
And him with further words I thus bespake,  
"What occupation do you there pursue?  
This is a lonesome place for one like you."  
Ere he replied, a flash of mild surprise  
Broke from the sable orbs of his yet-vivid eyes.

## 14

His words came feebly, from a feeble chest,  
But each in solemn order followed each,  
With something of a lofty utterance drest—  
Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach  
95 Of ordinary men; a stately speech;  
Such as grave Livers<sup>5</sup> do in Scotland use,  
Religious men, who give to God and man their dues.

## 15

He told, that to these waters he had come  
To gather leeches,<sup>6</sup> being old and poor:  
100 Employment hazardous and wearisome!  
And he had many hardships to endure:  
From pond to pond he roamed, from moor to moor;  
Housing, with God's good help, by choice or chance;  
And in this way he gained an honest maintenance.  
105

## 16

The old Man still stood talking by my side;  
But now his voice to me was like a stream  
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;  
And the whole body of the Man did seem  
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;  
110 Or like a man from some far region sent,  
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.

## 17

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;  
And hope that is unwilling to be fed;  
Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;  
115 And mighty Poets in their misery dead.  
—Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,

My question eagerly did I renew,  
"How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"

## 18

120 He with a smile did then his words repeat;  
And said, that, gathering leeches, far and wide  
He travelled; stirring thus about his feet  
The waters of the pools where they abide.  
"Once I could meet with them on every side;  
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;  
125 Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may."

## 19

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,  
The old Man's shape, and speech—all troubled me:  
In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace  
About the weary moors continually,  
130 Wandering about alone and silently.  
While I these thoughts within myself pursued,  
He, having made a pause, the same discourse  
renewed.

## 20

And soon with this he other matter blended,  
Cheerfully uttered, with demeanour kind,  
135 But stately in the main; and when he ended,  
I could have laughed myself to scorn to find  
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.  
"God," said I, "be my help and stay<sup>z</sup> secure;  
I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!"

140  
May 3–July 4, 1802

1807

## Endnotes

- Note 1: "This old man I met a few hundred yards from my cottage," Wordsworth told Isabella Fenwick in 1843, and "the account of him is taken from his own mouth." He wrote the poem eighteen months after the meeting. For the account of the meeting and the writing of the poem, which had the working title "The Leech Gatherer," see Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, October 3, 1800, p. 437, and May 4 and 7, 1802, pp. 442 and 443 in this volume. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2:  
After his early death through drug overdose, a death believed by many to have been a suicide, the poet Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770) became a prime symbol of neglected boy genius for the Romantics. He came to public attention in his hometown of Bristol in the west of England as the discoverer of the long-lost manuscripts of a local 15th-century monk named "Thomas Rowley." Rowley's works—in fact Chatterton's own inventions—included many poems. His pseudo-Chaucerian "An Excelente Balade of Charitie" used the rhyme royal stanza form that Wordsworth employs here. Reports of the frustrations that Chatterton experienced in his attempts to  
[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Robert Burns, here considered, as Chatterton is, a natural poet who died young and poor, without adequate recognition, and who seemed to have hastened his death through dissipation. [Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4:  
To outline his theory of the imagination, Wordsworth himself commented on lines 57–65 and 75–77, pointing out how the stone "is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast," the sea-beast is "stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone," and the old man is divested of enough life and motion to make "the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison." In this manner,

he stated, "the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination" were "all brought into conjunction" (Preface to the *Poems* of 1815). Compare Coleridge's definition of the imagination in *Biographia Literaria*, chap. 13 (see p. 523 [Return to reference 4](#))

- Note 5: Those who live gravely (as opposed to "loose livers," those who live for a life of pleasure). [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Used by medical attendants to draw their patients' blood for curative purposes. A leech gatherer, bare legged in shallow water, stirred the water to attract them and, when they fastened themselves to his legs, picked them off. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Support (a noun). [Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *creative* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *studied* [Return to reference °](#)

# **I wandered lonely as a cloud<sup>1</sup>**

5 I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

10 Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

15 The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:

20 For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

1804

1807, 1815

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1: For the original experience, two years earlier, see Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, April 15, 1802 (p. 440 in this volume). [Return to reference 1](#)

# My heart leaps up

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
5 So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.<sup>1</sup>

Mar. 26, 1802

1807

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Perhaps as distinguished from piety based on the Bible, in which the rainbow is the token of God's promise to Noah and his descendants never again to send a flood to destroy the earth.[Return to reference 1](#)



## Ode: Intimations of Immortality In 1843

Wordsworth said about this ode to Isabella Fenwick:

This was composed during my residence at Town End, Grasmere; two years at least passed between the writing of the four first stanzas and the remaining part. To the attentive and competent reader the whole sufficiently explains itself; but there may be no harm in adverting here to particular feelings or *experiences* of my own mind on which the structure of the poem partly rests. Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood than to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being. I have said elsewhere [in the opening stanza of "We Are Seven"]:

—A simple Child,  
That lightly draws its breath,  
And feels its life in every limb,  
What should it know of death!

But it was not so much from [feelings] of animal vivacity that *my* difficulty came as from a sense of the indomitableness of the spirit within me. I used to brood over the stories of Enoch and Elijah [Genesis 5.22–24; 2 Kings 2.11], and almost to persuade myself that, whatever might become of others, I should be translated, in something of the same way, to heaven. With a feeling congenial to this, I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality. At that time I was afraid of such processes. In later periods of life I have deplored, as we have all reason to do, a subjugation of an opposite character, and have rejoiced over the remembrances, as is expressed in the lines—

Obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings; etc.

To that dreamlike vividness and splendor which invest objects of sight in childhood, everyone, I believe, if he would look back, could bear testimony, and I need not dwell upon it here: but having in the Poem regarded it as presumptive evidence of a prior state of existence, I think it right to protest against a conclusion, which has given pain to some good and pious persons, that I meant to inculcate such a belief. It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith, as more than an element in our instincts of immortality. \* \* \* [W]hen I was impelled to write this Poem on the 'Immortality of the Soul,' I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a Poet.

When he dictated this long note to Isabella Fenwick, at the age of seventy-two or seventy-three, Wordsworth was troubled by objections that his apparent claim for the preexistence of the soul violated the Christian belief that the soul, although it survives after death, does not exist before the birth of an individual. His claim in the note is that he refers to the preexistence of the soul not in order to set out a religious doctrine but only so as to deal "as a Poet" with a common human experience: that the passing of youth involves the loss of a freshness and radiance investing everything one sees. Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," which he wrote (in its earliest version) after he had heard the first four stanzas of Wordsworth's poem, employs a similar figurative technique for a comparable, though more devastating, experience of loss.

The original published text of this poem (in 1807) had as its title only "Ode," and then as epigraph "*Paulo maiora canamus*" (Latin for "Let us sing of somewhat higher things") from Virgil's *Eclogue* 4.

# Ode

## *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*

The Child is Father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.<sup>1</sup>

### 1

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
    To me did seem  
    Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
5 It is not now as it hath been of yore;—  
    Turn wheresoe'er I may,  
    By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no  
more.

### 2

10 The Rainbow comes and goes,  
And lovely is the Rose,  
The Moon doth with delight  
Look round her when the heavens are bare,  
Waters on a starry night  
Are beautiful and fair;  
15 The sunshine is a glorious birth;  
But yet I know, where'er I go,

That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

### 3

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,  
And while the young lambs bound  
20 As to the tabor's<sup>2</sup> sound,  
To me alone there came a thought of grief:  
A timely utterance<sup>3</sup> gave that thought relief,  
And I again am strong:  
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;  
25 No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;  
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,  
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,<sup>4</sup>  
And all the earth is gay;  
Land and sea  
30 Give themselves up to jollity,  
And with the heart of May  
Doth every Beast keep holiday;—  
Thou Child of Joy,  
35 Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy  
Shepherd-boy!

### 4

Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call  
Ye to each other make; I see  
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;  
My heart is at your festival,  
My head hath its coronal,<sup>5</sup>  
40 The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.  
Oh evil day! if I were sullen  
While Earth herself is adorning,  
This sweet May-morning,  
And the Children are culling

45           On every side,  
          In a thousand valleys far and wide,  
          Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,  
          And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:—  
          I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!  
50           —But there's a Tree, of many, one,  
          A single Field which I have looked upon,  
          Both of them speak of something that is gone:  
          The Pansy at my feet  
          Doth the same tale repeat:  
55           Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
          Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

## 5

          Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
          The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,<sup>6</sup>  
          Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
60           And cometh from afar:  
          Not in entire forgetfulness,  
          And not in utter nakedness,  
          But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
          From God, who is our home:  
65           Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
          Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
          Upon the growing Boy,  
          But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
          He sees it in his joy;  
70           The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
          Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,  
          And by the vision splendid  
          Is on his way attended;  
          At length the Man perceives it die away,  
75           And fade into the light of common day.

## 6

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;  
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,  
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,  
And no unworthy aim,  
80       The homely<sup>7</sup> Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,  
Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came.

## 7

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,  
85       A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!  
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,  
Fretted<sup>8</sup> by sallies of his mother's kisses,  
With light upon him from his father's eyes!  
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,  
90       Some fragment from his dream of human life,  
Shaped by himself with newly-learnèd art;  
A wedding or a festival,  
A mourning or a funeral;  
And this hath now his heart,  
95       And unto this he frames his song:  
Then will he fit his tongue  
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;  
But it will not be long  
Ere this be thrown aside,  
100       And with new joy and pride  
The little Actor cons<sup>9</sup> another part;  
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"<sup>9</sup>  
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,  
That Life brings with her in her equipage;  
105       As if his whole vocation

Were endless imitation.

8

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie  
Thy Soul's immensity;  
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep  
110 Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,  
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,  
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—  
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!  
On whom those truths do rest,  
115 Which we are toiling all our lives to find,  
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;  
Thou, over whom thy Immortality  
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,  
A Presence which is not to be put by;  
120 Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might  
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,  
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke  
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,  
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?  
125 Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,  
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

9

O joy! that in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
130 That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive!°  
The thought of our past years in me doth breed  
Perpetual benediction: not indeed  
For that which is most worthy to be blest;

135 Delight and liberty, the simple creed  
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,  
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:—  
Not for these I raise  
The song of thanks and praise;  
140 But for those obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings;  
Blank misgivings of a Creature  
Moving about in worlds not realised,<sup>1</sup>  
145 High instincts before which our mortal Nature  
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:  
But for those first affections,  
Those shadowy recollections,  
Which, be they what they may,  
150 Are yet the fountain light of all our day,  
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;  
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
155 To perish never;  
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,  
Nor Man nor Boy,  
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,  
Can utterly abolish or destroy!  
160 Hence in a season of calm weather  
Though inland far we be,  
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
165 And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.



Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!  
And let the young Lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound!  
170 We in thought will join your throng,  
Ye that pipe and ye that play,  
Ye that through your hearts to-day  
Feel the gladness of the May!  
What though the radiance which was once so bright  
175 Be now for ever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
180 In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,  
185 In years that bring the philosophic mind.

## 11

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,  
Forebode<sup>o</sup> not any severing of our loves!  
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;  
I only have relinquished one delight  
190 To live beneath your more habitual sway.  
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,  
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;  
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day  
Is lovely yet;  
195 The Clouds that gather round the setting sun  
Do take a sober colouring from an eye  
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;  
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
 Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
 To me the meanest<sup>o</sup> flower that blows<sup>o</sup> can give  
 Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The concluding lines of Wordsworth's "My heart leaps up" (see p. 380, above).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A small drum often used to beat time for dancing.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Perhaps "My heart leaps up," perhaps "Resolution and Independence," perhaps not a poem at all.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Of the many suggested interpretations, the simplest is "from the fields where they were sleeping." Wordsworth often associated a rising wind with the revival of spirit and of poetic inspiration (see, for example, the opening passage of *The Prelude*, p. 393, below).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Circlet of wildflowers, with which the shepherd boys trimmed their hats in May.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The sun, as metaphor for the soul.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In the old sense: simple and friendly.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Irritated; or possibly in the old sense: checkered over.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: From a sonnet by the Elizabethan poet Samuel Daniel. In Daniel's era *humorous* meant "capricious" and also referred to the various characters and temperaments ("humors") represented in drama.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Not seeming real (see Wordsworth's comment about "this abyss of idealism" in the headnote on p. 381, above).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In Greece foot races were often run for the prize of a branch or wreath of palm. Wordsworth's line echoes Paul, 1 Corinthians 9:24, who uses such races as a metaphor for life:

“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?”[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *studies*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fleeting*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *predict, portend*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lowliest* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *blooms*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Solitary Reaper<sup>1</sup>

Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland Lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
5 Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the Vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
10 Of travellers in some shady haunt,  
Among Arabian sands:  
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard  
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
15 Among the farthest Hebrides.<sup>2</sup>

Will no one tell me what she sings?<sup>3</sup>  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers<sup>o</sup> flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago:  
20 Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of to-day?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang  
25 As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending;—

30 I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.

Nov. 5, 1805

1807

## Endnotes

- Note 1: One of the rare poems not based on Wordsworth's own experience. In a note published with the poem in 1807, Wordsworth says that it was suggested by a passage in Thomas Wilkinson's *Tours to the British Mountains* (1824), which he had seen in manuscript: "Passed a female who was reaping alone: she sung in Erse [the Gaelic language of Scotland] as she bended over her sickle; the sweetest human voice I ever heard: her strains were tenderly melancholy, and felt delicious, long after they were heard no more." In 1803 William, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Coleridge toured Scotland, making a pilgrimage to Robert Burns's grave and visiting places mentioned in Walter Scott's historical notes to his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Islands off the west coast of Scotland.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The poet does not understand Erse, the language in which she sings.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: verses [Return to reference °](#)

# SONNETS

## Prefatory Sonnet [Nuns fret not]<sup>1</sup>

Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room;  
And Hermits are contented with their Cells;  
And Students with their pensive Citadels:  
Maids at the Wheel,<sup>°</sup> the Weaver at his Loom,  
5 Sit blithe and happy; Bees that soar for bloom,  
High as the highest Peak of Furness Fells,<sup>2</sup>  
Will murmur by the hour in Foxglove bells:  
In truth, the prison, unto which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence to me,  
10 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound  
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground:  
Pleas'd if some Souls (for such there needs must be)  
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
Should find short solace there, as I have found.

1802

1815

### Endnotes

- Note 1: In *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), this celebration of the restrictions of the sonnet form headed up the book's selection of sonnets. In old age Wordsworth remembered that his interest in the form was first revived when Dorothy read John Milton's sonnets aloud to him in 1802.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Hills forming the southwestern part of the Lake District.[Return to reference 2](#)

### Notes

- °: *spinning wheel*[Return to reference °](#)

## Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802<sup>1</sup>

Earth has not any thing to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:  
This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
5 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;  
10 Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

1802

1807

### Endnotes

- Note 1: The date of this experience was not September 3 but July 31, 1802. Its occasion was a trip to France, made possible by a brief truce in the war (see Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, July 1802, pp. 443–44 in this volume). Wordsworth's conflicted feelings about this return to France, where he had once supported the Revolution and loved Annette Vallon, inform a number of personal and political sonnets that he wrote in 1802, among them the four that follow. [Return to reference 1](#)



## It is a beauteous evening

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,  
The holy time is quiet as a Nun  
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun  
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;  
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:  
5 Listen! the mighty Being is awake,  
And doth with his eternal motion make  
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.  
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,<sup>1</sup>  
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,  
10 Thy nature is not therefore less divine:  
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom<sup>2</sup> all the year;  
And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,  
God being with thee when we know it not.

Aug. 1802

1807

### Endnotes

- Note 1: The girl walking with Wordsworth is Caroline, his daughter by Annette Vallon. For the event described see Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, July 1802 (p. 444 in this volume).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Where the souls destined for heaven rest after death. Luke 16:22: "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom."[Return to reference 2](#)

## To Toussaint l'Ouverture<sup>1</sup>

Toussaint, the most unhappy Man of Men!  
Whether the rural Milk-maid by her Cow  
Sing in thy hearing, or thou liest now  
Alone in some deep dungeon's earless den,  
O miserable Chieftain! where and when  
5 Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou  
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:  
Though fallen Thyself, never to rise again,  
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind  
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;  
10 There's not a breathing of the common wind  
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;  
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,  
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind.

1802

1803, 1807

### Endnotes

- Note 1: First published in the *Morning Post*, Feb. 2, 1803. The formerly enslaved general Toussaint Louverture was a leader of the rebellion of enslaved persons in the French colony of St.-Domingue, now Haiti. After issuing a new constitution for the colony (see pp. 222–25 in this volume), Toussaint was arrested and taken to France in June 1802. He died in prison in April 1803. [Return to reference 1](#)

## September 1st, 1802<sup>1</sup>

We had a fellow-Passenger who came  
From Calais with us, gaudy in array,  
A Negro Woman like a Lady gay,  
Yet silent as a woman fearing blame;  
Dejected, meek, yea pitiably tame,  
5 She sat, from notice turning not away,  
But on our proffered kindness still did lay  
A weight of languid speech, or at the same  
Was silent, motionless in eyes and face.  
She was a Negro Woman driv'n from France,  
10 Rejected like all others of that race,  
Not one of whom may now find footing there;  
This the poor Out-cast did to us declare,  
Nor murmured at the unfeeling Ordinance.

1802

1803, 1807

### Endnotes

- Note 1: First published, with the title "The Banished Negroes," in the *Morning Post*, Feb. 11, 1803. In 1827 Wordsworth added an explanatory headnote beneath the title: "Among the capricious acts of tyranny that disgraced those times, was the chasing of all Negroes from France by decree of the government: we had a Fellow-passenger who was one of the expelled." [Return to reference 1](#)

## London, 1802<sup>1</sup>

Milton! thou should'st be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower<sup>o</sup>  
5 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;  
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.  
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:  
10 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,  
So didst thou travel on life's common way,  
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Sept. 1802

1807

### Endnotes

- Note 1: One of a series "written immediately after my return from France to London, when I could not but be struck, as here described, with the vanity and parade of our own country \*\*\* as contrasted with the quiet, and I may say the desolation, that the revolution had produced in France. This must be borne in mind, or else the reader may think that in this and the succeeding sonnets I have exaggerated the mischief engendered and fostered among us by undisturbed wealth" [*Wordsworth's note*, 1843].[Return to reference 1](#)

### Notes

- °: *endowment, gift*[Return to reference °](#)

## The world is too much with us

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!<sup>1</sup>  
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
5 The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for every thing, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
10 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton<sup>2</sup> blow his wreathèd horn.

1802–04

1807

### Endnotes

- Note 1: Gift. It is the act of giving the heart away that is sordid.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A sea deity, usually represented as blowing on a conch shell. Proteus was an old man of the sea who (in the *Odyssey*) could assume a variety of shapes. The description of Proteus echoes *Paradise Lost* 3.603–04, and that of Triton echoes Edmund Spenser's *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, lines 244–45.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Surprised by joy<sup>1</sup>

Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind  
I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom  
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb,  
That spot which no vicissitude can find?  
Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—  
5 But how could I forget thee? Through what power,  
Even for the least division of an hour,  
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind  
To my most grievous loss!—That thought's return  
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,  
10 Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,  
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;  
That neither present time, nor years unborn  
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

1813–14

1815

### Endnotes

- Note 1: This was in fact suggested by my daughter Catherine, long after her death [*Wordsworth's note*]. Catherine Wordsworth died June 4, 1812, at the age of four.[Return to reference 1](#)

# Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways<sup>1</sup>

Motions and Means, on land and sea at war  
With old poetic feeling, not for this,  
Shall ye, by Poets even, be judged amiss!  
Nor shall your presence, howsoe'er it mar  
The loveliness of Nature, prove a bar  
5 To the Mind's gaining that prophetic sense  
Of future change, that point of vision, whence  
May be discovered what in soul ye are.  
In spite of all that beauty may disown  
In your harsh features, Nature doth embrace  
10 Her lawful offspring in Man's art; and Time,  
Pleased with your triumphs o'er his brother Space,  
Accepts from your bold hands the proffered crown  
Of hope, and smiles on you with cheer sublime.

1833

## Endnotes

1835

- Note 1: In late middle age Wordsworth demonstrates, as he had predicted in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that the poet will assimilate to his subject matter the "material revolution" produced by science. [Return to reference 1](#)

## The 1805 Prelude

We cannot be sure what William Wordsworth would have thought of the title by which readers now know his major work, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. The poet's widow gave the poem that title when her husband's literary executors published it in July 1850, three months after his death. Wordsworth himself had referred to it, variously, as "the poem to Coleridge" or "the poem on the growth of my own mind." Wordsworth's readership had known of the existence of this autobiographical poem since his 1814 publication of *The Excursion*, which had the subtitle "Being a portion of *The Recluse*." In the preface to that poem, which explained that *The Excursion* was part of a philosophical poem, still in preparation, titled *The Recluse*, Wordsworth revealed further that *The Recluse* would appear with a supplement: a poem, "long finished," he stated, that traced how Nature and Education had prepared the poet for executing the "arduous labour" which that philosophical poem would entail. This other poem—which is the one we now know as *The Prelude*—scrutinized his qualifications for that task. The "two Works have the same kind of relation to each other," he explained, as an ante-chapel has to a nave or "body of a gothic church."

Where *The Recluse* was never really begun, despite what that 1814 subtitle and preface indicated, *The Prelude*, by contrast, appears to have been a poem that Wordsworth could never really declare finished. He completed it, and then, rather than declaring it ready for the press, he completed it again. Revision occupied him for a half-century, claiming the time he had aimed to devote to *The Recluse*. Because he held it back from publication, this poem of self-scrutiny became a kind of lifetime companion to the poet, its account of his past altered to keep pace with the changes that age brought to its creator. The resulting gap between its dates of composition and date of publication is obliquely acknowledged in the title Mary Wordsworth devised. *The Prelude* was a good title, one of Wordsworth's executors observed, precisely because it would discourage readers from supposing that "it was his final production, instead of being, as it really is, one of his *earlier* works." Wordsworth



had so arranged things, however, that when at last in 1850 it appeared as a book, this “earlier” work did double duty (in the words of Wordsworth scholar Mary Jacobus) as “a self-authored epitaph.” In 1926 Ernest de Selincourt, working from manuscripts, printed the version of the poem that Wordsworth completed in 1805, and which for many readers since then has become the preferred version. Other scholars later established the existence of a still earlier and shorter version that Wordsworth composed in 1798–99. This anthology uses the 1805 text, reproduced from the edition that Jonathan Wordsworth, Stephen Gill, and M. H. Abrams prepared in 1979 for the Norton Critical Edition of *The Prelude*.

As the *Prelude*’s multiple recastings suggest, Wordsworth’s vision of his poem—his view of himself, too—altered substantially over the years, at the start of the process especially. When he decided to enlarge the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, he committed himself to expanding lyric introspection to epic dimensions. It was “a thing unprecedented in Literary history,” he observed in an 1805 letter that hints at this experiment with genre, “that a man should talk so much about himself.” Between 1801 and 1805 he heightened his poem’s style and incorporated allusions to earlier epics, self-consciously measuring his achievement as a poet-prophet against Milton’s in *Paradise Lost*. Another prototype for his poem can be found in the tradition of spiritual autobiography that Saint Augustine had founded with his *Confessions* in the fourth century and that the scandalous Frenchman Jean-Jacques Rousseau had revived in the 1780s. Rousseau’s *Confessions* made big, bold claims for the fascination of the author’s subjectivity in all its unique intricacies, and Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in some measure follows suit, as it personalizes epic and makes a literary form devoted to the public life of great collectivities (the fall of Troy or of Man) absorb representations of childhood anxieties and guilt that we might nowadays think of as belonging to a psychological case history. But as narrator, rather than narrated subject, Wordsworth insists on the wider import of this singular story. *The Prelude* thus asks to be read as the representative testimony of someone who (along with

Coleridge, to whom the poem is addressed as a kind of letter, and along with an entire generation, in fact) has grappled with the traumatic experience of revolutionary optimism followed by defeat.

The poet has made it his urgent task to recover that lost faith: "I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration" (11.341–42). The persistent metaphor of *The Prelude*, shared with many autobiographies, is that of life as a circular journey. This poem of many wanderers and journeys concludes by installing the wandering poet back in his starting place. The prodigal son has completed the long journey home, after being lured into a crisis of identity by youthful radicalism and a residence in France. The poet declares the poem itself to be proof that he has realized the vocation he had queried at his setting-out. For many modern readers, however, much of the brilliance of *The Prelude* inheres in the passages in which the poet confesses to his failure to close the circle. What these readers value are Wordsworth's recurring expressions of doubt as to whether memory could ever bind the disparate materials of the individual's life into a coherent whole. A sense of the disjuncture between the man and the boy, the self who remembers and the self who is remembered, haunts this poem. This autobiographical enterprise demonstrates that sometimes self-estrangement—"I seem / Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself, / And of some other being" (2.31–33)—and self-knowledge proceed hand in hand.

# Book First.

## *Introduction: Childhood and School-time*

Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze,  
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds  
And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,  
And seems half conscious of the joy it gives.  
O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!  
5 A captive greets thee, coming from a house  
Of bondage, from yon city's <sup>o</sup>walls set free,  
A prison where he hath been long immured.  
Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,  
May fix my habitation where I will.  
10 What dwelling shall receive me, in what vale  
Shall be my harbour, underneath what grove  
Shall I take up my home, and what sweet stream  
Shall with its murmurs lull me to my rest?  
The earth is all before me <sup>1</sup>—with a heart  
15 Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,  
I look about, and should the guide I chuse  
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud  
I cannot miss my way. I breathe again—  
Trances of thought and mountings of the mind  
20 Come fast upon me. It is shaken off,  
As by miraculous gift 'tis shaken off,  
That burthen of my own unnatural self,  
The heavy weight of many a weary day  
Not mine, and such as were not made for me.  
25 Long months of peace—if such bold word accord  
With any promises of human life—  
Long months of ease and undisturbed delight

30 Are mine in prospect.<sup>o</sup> Whither shall I turn,  
By road or pathway, or through open field,  
Or shall a twig or any floating thing  
Upon the river point me out my course?

Enough that I am free, for months to come  
May dedicate myself to chosen tasks,  
May quit the tiresome sea and dwell on shore—  
35 If not a settler on the soil, at least  
To drink wild water, and to pluck green herbs,  
And gather fruits fresh from their native bough.  
Nay more, if I may trust myself, this hour  
Hath brought a gift that consecrates my joy;  
40 For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven  
Was blowing on my body, felt within  
A corresponding mild creative breeze,  
A vital breeze which travelled gently on  
O'er things which it had made, and is become  
45 A tempest, a redundant<sup>o</sup> energy,  
Vexing its own creation. 'Tis a power  
That does not come unrecognised, a storm  
Which, breaking up a long-continued frost,  
Brings with it vernal<sup>o</sup> promises, the hope  
50 Of active days, of dignity and thought,  
Of prowess in an honorable field,  
Pure passions, virtue, knowledge, and delight,  
The holy life of music and of verse.<sup>2</sup>

55 Thus far, O friend,<sup>3</sup> did I, not used to make  
A present joy the matter of my song,<sup>4</sup>  
Pour out that day my soul in measured strains,  
Even in the very words which I have here  
Recorded. To the open fields I told  
A prophesy; poetic numbers<sup>o</sup> came  
60 Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe  
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,

For holy services. Great hopes were mine:  
My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's  
Internal echo of the imperfect sound—  
65 To both I listened, drawing from them both  
A chearful confidence in things to come.

Whereat, being not unwilling now to give  
A respite to this passion,<sup>5</sup> I paced on  
Gently, with careless steps, and came erelong  
70 To a green shady place where down I sate  
Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice  
And settling into gentler happiness.  
'Twas autumn, and a calm and placid day  
With warmth as much as needed from a sun  
75 Two hours declined towards the west, a day  
With silver clouds and sunshine on the grass,  
And, in the sheltered grove where I was couched,  
A perfect stillness. On the ground I lay  
Passing through many thoughts, yet mainly such  
80 As to myself pertained. I made a choice  
Of one sweet vale<sup>6</sup> whither my steps should turn,  
And saw, methought, the very house and fields  
Present before my eyes; nor did I fail  
To add meanwhile assurance of some work  
85 Of glory there forthwith to be begun—  
Perhaps too there performed.<sup>7</sup> Thus long I lay  
Cheered by the genial pillow of the earth  
Beneath my head, soothed by a sense of touch  
From the warm ground, that balanced me, else lost  
90 Entirely, seeing nought, nought hearing, save  
When here and there about the grove of oaks  
Where was my bed, an acorn from the trees  
Fell audibly, and with a startling sound.

Thus occupied in mind I lingered here  
Contented, nor rose up until the sun

Had almost touched the horizon; bidding then  
95 A farewell to the city left behind,  
Even with the chance equipment of that hour  
I journeyed towards the vale which I had chosen.  
100 It was a splendid evening, and my soul  
Did once again make trial of the strength  
Restored to her afresh; nor did she want  
Eolian visitations<sup>8</sup>—but the harp  
Was soon defrauded, and the banded host  
105 Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds,  
And lastly utter silence. 'Be it so,  
It is an injury', said I, 'to this day  
To think of any thing but present joy.'  
So, like a peasant, I pursued my road  
110 Beneath the evening sun, nor had one wish  
Again to bend the sabbath of that time<sup>9</sup>  
To a servile yoke. What need of many words?—  
A pleasant loitering journey, through two days  
Continued, brought me to my hermitage.<sup>○</sup>

115 I spare to speak, my friend, of what ensued—  
The admiration and the love, the life  
In common things, the endless store of things  
Rare, or at least so seeming, every day  
Found all about me in one neighbourhood,  
120 The self-congratulation,<sup>○</sup> the complete  
Composure, and the happiness entire.  
But speedily a longing in me rose  
To brace myself to some determined aim,  
Reading or thinking, either to lay up  
125 New stores, or rescue from decay the old  
By timely interference. I had hopes  
Still higher, that with a frame of outward life  
I might endue,<sup>○</sup> might fix in a visible home,  
Some portion of those phantoms of conceit,<sup>○</sup>

130 That had been floating loose about so long,  
And to such beings temperately deal forth  
The many feelings that oppressed my heart.  
But I have been discouraged: gleams of light  
Flash often from the east, then disappear,  
135 And mock me with a sky that ripens not  
Into a steady morning. If my mind,  
Remembering the sweet promise of the past,  
Would gladly grapple with some noble theme,  
Vain is her wish—where'er she turns she finds  
140 Impediments from day to day renewed.

And now it would content me to yield up  
Those lofty hopes awhile for present gifts  
Of humbler industry. But, O dear friend,  
The poet, gentle creature as he is,  
145 Hath like the lover his unruly times—  
His fits when he is neither sick nor well,  
Though no distress be near him but his own  
Unmanageable thoughts. The mind itself,  
The meditative mind, best pleased perhaps  
150 While she as duteous as the mother dove  
Sits brooding, <sup>1</sup> lives not always to that end,  
But hath less quiet instincts—goadings on  
That drive her as in trouble through the groves.  
With me is now such passion, which I blame  
155 No otherwise than as it lasts too long.

When, as becomes a man who would prepare  
For such a glorious work, I through myself  
Make rigorous inquisition, the report  
Is often chearing; for I neither seem  
160 To lack that first great gift, the vital soul,  
Nor general truths which are themselves a sort  
Of elements and agents, under-powers,  
Subordinate helpers of the living mind.

165 Nor am I naked in external things,  
Forms, images, nor numerous other aids  
Of less regard, though won perhaps with toil,  
And needful to build up a poet's praise.  
Time, place, and manners,<sup>1</sup> these I seek, and these  
I find in plenteous store, but nowhere such  
170 As may be singled out with steady choice—  
No little band of yet remembered names  
Whom I, in perfect confidence, might hope  
To summon back from lonesome banishment  
And make them inmates in the hearts of men  
175 Now living, or to live in times to come.  
Sometimes, mistaking vainly, as I fear,  
Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,  
I settle on some British theme, some old  
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;<sup>2</sup>  
180 More often resting at some gentle place  
Within the groves of chivalry I pipe  
Among the shepherds, with reposing knights  
Sit by a fountain-side and hear their tales.  
Sometimes, more sternly moved, I would relate  
185 How vanquished Mithridates northward passed  
And, hidden in the cloud of years, became  
That Odin, father of a race by whom  
Perished the Roman Empire;<sup>3</sup> how the friends  
And followers of Sertorius, out of Spain  
190 Flying, found shelter in the Fortunate Isles,  
And left their usages, their arts and laws,  
To disappear by a slow gradual death,  
To dwindle and to perish one by one,  
Starved in those narrow bounds—but not the soul  
195 Of liberty, which fifteen hundred years  
Survived, and, when the European came  
With skill and power that could not be withstood,  
Did like a pestilence maintain its hold,



200 And wasted down by glorious death that race  
Of natural heroes.<sup>4</sup> Or I would record  
How in tyrannic times, some unknown man,  
Unheard of in the chronicles of kings,  
Suffered in silence for the love of truth;  
205 How that one Frenchman, through continued force  
Of meditation on the inhuman deeds  
Of the first conquerors of the Indian Isles,  
Went single in his ministry across  
The ocean, not to comfort the oppressed,  
But like a thirsty wind to roam about  
210 Withering the oppressor;<sup>5</sup> how Gustavus found  
Help at his need in Dalecarlia's mines;<sup>6</sup>  
How Wallace fought for Scotland, left the name  
Of Wallace<sup>7</sup> to be found like a wild flower  
All over his dear country, left the deeds  
215 Of Wallace like a family of ghosts  
To people the steep rocks and river-banks,  
Her natural sanctuaries, with a local soul  
Of independence and stern liberty.  
Sometimes it suits me better to shape out  
220 Some tale from my own heart, more near akin  
To my own passions and habitual thoughts,  
Some variegated story, in the main  
Lofty, with interchange of gentler things.  
But deadening admonitions will succeed,  
225 And the whole beauteous fabric seems to lack  
Foundation, and withal appears throughout  
Shadowy and unsubstantial.

Then, last wish—  
My last and favorite aspiration—then  
230 I yearn towards some philosophic song  
Of truth<sup>8</sup> that cherishes<sup>9</sup> our daily life,  
With meditations passionate from deep

Recesses in man's heart, immortal verse  
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre;<sup>9</sup>  
But from this awful<sup>o</sup> burthen I full soon  
235 Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust  
That mellow years will bring a riper mind  
And clearer insight. Thus from day to day  
I live a mockery of the brotherhood  
Of vice and virtue, with no skill to part<sup>o</sup>  
240 Vague longing that is bred by want<sup>o</sup> of power,  
From paramount impulse not to be withstood;  
A timorous capacity, from prudence;  
From circumspection,<sup>o</sup> infinite delay.  
Humility and modest awe themselves  
245 Betray me, serving often for a cloak  
To a more subtle selfishness, that now  
Doth lock my functions up in blank reserve,<sup>o</sup>  
Now dupes me by an over-anxious eye  
That with a false activity beats off  
250 Simplicity and self-presented truth.  
Ah, better far than this to stray about  
Voluptuously<sup>o</sup> through fields and rural walks  
And ask no record of the hours given up  
To vacant musing, unproved neglect  
255 Of all things, and deliberate holiday.  
Far better never to have heard the name  
Of zeal and just ambition than to live  
Thus baffled by a mind that every hour  
Turns recreant<sup>o</sup> to her task, takes heart again,  
260 Then feels immediately some hollow thought  
Hang like an interdict<sup>o</sup> upon her hopes.  
This is my lot; for either still I find  
Some imperfection in the chosen theme,  
Or see of absolute accomplishment  
265 Much wanting—so much wanting—in myself  
That I recoil and droop, and seek repose

In indolence from vain perplexity,  
Unprofitably travelling towards the grave,  
Like a false steward who hath much received  
270 And renders nothing back.<sup>1</sup>

Was it for this<sup>2</sup>  
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved  
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,  
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,  
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice  
270 That flowed along my dreams? For this didst thou,  
O Derwent, travelling over the green plains  
Near my 'sweet birthplace',<sup>3</sup> didst thou, beauteous  
stream,  
Make ceaseless music through the night and day,  
Which with its steady cadence tempering  
280 Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts  
To more than infant softness, giving me  
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,  
A knowledge, a dim earnest,<sup>4</sup> of the calm  
Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves?  
285 When, having left his mountains, to the towers  
Of Cockermouth that beauteous river came,  
Behind my father's house he passed, close by,  
Along the margin of our terrace walk.<sup>4</sup>  
He was a playmate whom we dearly loved:  
290 Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,  
A naked boy, in one delightful rill,  
A little mill-race<sup>5</sup> severed from his stream,  
Made one long bathing of a summer's day,  
Basked in the sun, and plunged, and basked again,  
295 Alternate, all a summer's day, or coursed  
Over the sandy fields, leaping through groves  
Of yellow grunsel;<sup>6</sup> or, when crag and hill,  
The woods, and distant Skiddaw's<sup>7</sup> lofty height,

300 Were bronzed with a deep radiance, stood alone  
Beneath the sky, as if I had been born  
On Indian plains,<sup>8</sup> and from my mother's hut  
Had run abroad in wantonness to sport,  
A naked savage, in the thunder-shower.

305 Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up  
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear,  
Much favored in my birthplace, and no less  
In that beloved vale<sup>9</sup> to which erelong  
I was transplanted. Well I call to mind—  
'Twas at an early age, ere I had seen  
310 Nine summers—when upon the mountain slope  
The frost and breath of frosty wind had snapped  
The last autumnal crocus, 'twas my joy  
To wander half the night among the cliffs  
And the smooth hollows where the woodcocks ran  
315 Along the open turf. In thought and wish  
That time, my shoulder all with springes<sup>o</sup> hung,  
I was a fell destroyer. On the heights  
Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied  
My anxious visitation, hurrying on,  
320 Still hurrying, hurrying onward. Moon and stars  
Were shining o'er my head; I was alone,  
And seemed to be a trouble to the peace  
That was among them. Sometimes it befel  
In these night-wanderings, that a strong desire  
325 O'erpowered my better reason, and the bird  
Which was the captive of another's toils<sup>1</sup>  
Became my prey; and when the deed was done  
I heard among the solitary hills  
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds  
330 Of undistinguishable motion, steps  
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

Nor less in springtime, when on southern banks

The shining sun had from her knot of leaves  
Decoyed the primrose flower, and when the vales  
335 And woods were warm, was I a plunderer then  
In the high places, on the lonesome peaks,  
Where'er among the mountains and the winds  
The mother-bird had built her lodge. Though mean<sup>o</sup>  
My object and inglorious, yet the end<sup>o</sup>  
340 Was not ignoble. Oh, when I have hung  
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass  
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock  
But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,  
345 Suspended by the blast which blew amain,  
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time  
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,  
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind  
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky  
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!

350 The mind of man is framed even like the breath  
And harmony of music. There is a dark  
Invisible workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, and makes them move  
In one society. Ah me, that all  
355 The terrors, all the early miseries,  
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, that all  
The thoughts and feelings which have been infused  
Into my mind, should ever have made up  
The calm existence that is mine when I  
360 Am worthy of myself. Praise to the end,  
Thanks likewise for the means! But I believe  
That Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame  
A favored being, from his earliest dawn  
Of infancy doth open out the clouds  
365 As at the touch of lightning, seeking him  
With gentlest visitation; not the less,  
Though haply<sup>o</sup> aiming at the self-same end,

Does it delight her sometimes to employ  
Severer interventions, ministry  
370 More palpable—and so she dealt with me.

One evening—surely I was led by her—  
I went alone into a shepherd's boat,  
A skiff that to a willow-tree was tied  
Within a rocky cove, its usual home.  
375 'Twas by the shores of Patterdale, a vale  
Wherein I was a stranger, thither come  
A schoolboy traveller at the holidays.  
Forth rambled from the village inn alone,  
No sooner had I sight of this small skiff,  
380 Discovered thus by unexpected chance,  
Than I unloosed her tether and embarked.  
The moon was up, the lake was shining clear  
Among the hoary mountains; from the shore  
I pushed, and struck the oars, and struck again  
385 In cadence, and my little boat moved on  
Even like a man who moves with stately step  
Though bent on speed. It was an act of stealth  
And troubled pleasure. Nor without the voice  
Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on,  
390 Leaving behind her still on either side  
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,  
Until they melted all into one track  
Of sparkling light. A rocky steep uprose  
Above the cavern of the willow-tree,  
395 And now, as suited one who proudly rowed  
With his best skill, I fixed a steady view  
Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,  
The bound of the horizon—for behind  
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.<sup>2</sup>  
400 She was an elfin pinnace;<sup>o</sup> lustily  
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,  
And as I rose upon the stroke my boat

Went heaving through the water like a swan—  
When from behind that craggy steep, till then  
405 The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,  
As if with voluntary power instinct,<sup>o</sup>  
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,  
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff  
Rose up between me and the stars, and still  
410 With measured motion, like a living thing  
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned  
And through the silent water stole my way  
Back to the cavern of the willow-tree.  
There, in her mooring-place, I left my bark  
415 And through the meadows homeward went with  
grave  
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen  
That spectacle, for many days my brain  
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense  
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts  
420 There was a darkness—call it solitude  
Or blank desertion—no familiar shapes  
Of hourly objects, images of trees,  
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,  
But huge and mighty forms that do not live  
Like living men moved slowly through my mind  
425 By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

Wisdom and spirit of the universe,  
Thou soul that art the eternity of thought,  
That giv'st to forms and images a breath  
430 And everlasting motion—not in vain,  
By day or star-light, thus from my first dawn  
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me  
The passions that build up our human soul,  
Not with the mean and vulgar<sup>o</sup> works of man,  
435 But with high objects, with enduring things,  
With life and Nature, purifying thus

The elements of feeling and of thought,  
And sanctifying by such discipline  
Both pain and fear, until we recognise  
440 A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.  
Nor was this fellowship vouchsafed to me  
With stinted kindness. In November days,  
When vapours rolling down the valleys made  
A lonely scene more lonesome, among woods  
445 At noon, and 'mid the calm of summer nights  
When by the margin of the trembling lake  
Beneath the gloomy hills I homeward went  
In solitude, such intercourse was mine—  
'Twas mine among the fields both day and night,  
450 And by the waters all the summer long.

And in the frosty season, when the sun  
Was set, and visible for many a mile  
The cottage windows through the twilight blazed,  
I heeded not the summons; happy time  
455 It was indeed for all of us, to me  
It was a time of rapture. Clear and loud  
The village clock tolled six; I wheeled about  
Proud and exulting, like an untired horse  
That cares not for its home. All shod with steel<sup>o</sup>  
460 We hissed along the polished ice in games  
Confederate, imitative of the chace  
And woodland pleasures, the resounding horn,  
The pack loud bellowing, and the hunted hare.  
So through the darkness and the cold we flew,  
465 And not a voice was idle. With the din,  
Meanwhile, the precipices rang aloud;  
The leafless trees and every icy crag  
Tinkled like iron; while the distant hills  
Into the tumult sent an alien sound  
470 Of melancholy, not unnoticed; while the stars,  
Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west



The orange sky of evening died away.

Not seldom from the uproar I retired  
Into a silent bay, or sportively  
475 Glanced sideways,<sup>3</sup> leaving the tumultuous throng,  
To cut across the image of a star  
That gleamed upon the ice. And oftentimes  
When we had given our bodies to the wind,  
And all the shadowy banks on either side  
480 Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still  
The rapid line of motion, then at once  
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,  
Stopped short—yet still the solitary cliffs  
Wheeled by me, even as if the earth had rolled  
485 With visible motion her diurnal<sup>o</sup> round.  
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,<sup>o</sup>  
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched  
Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.

Ye presences of Nature, in the sky  
490 Or on the earth, ye visions of the hills  
And souls of lonely places, can I think  
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed  
Such ministry—when ye through many a year  
Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,  
495 On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,  
Impressed upon all forms the characters<sup>o</sup>  
Of danger or desire, and thus did make  
The surface of the universal earth  
With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear,  
500 Work<sup>o</sup> like a sea?

Not uselessly employed,  
I might pursue this theme through every change  
Of exercise and play to which the year  
Did summon us in its delightful round.

505 We were a noisy crew; the sun in heaven  
Beheld not vales more beautiful than ours,  
Nor saw a race in happiness and joy  
More worthy of the fields where they were sown.  
I would record with no reluctant voice  
510 The woods of autumn, and their hazel bowers  
With milk-white clusters hung, the rod and line—  
True symbol of the foolishness of hope—  
Which with its strong enchantment led us on  
By rocks and pools, shut out from every star  
All the green summer, to forlorn cascades  
515 Among the windings of the mountain brooks.  
Unfading recollections—at this hour  
The heart is almost mine with which I felt  
From some hill-top on sunny afternoons  
The kite, high up among the fleecy clouds,  
520 Pull at its rein like an impatient courser,<sup>o</sup>  
Or, from the meadows sent on gusty days,  
Beheld her breast the wind, then suddenly  
Dashed headlong and rejected by the storm.

525 Ye lowly cottages in which we dwelt,  
A ministration of your own was yours,  
A sanctity, a safeguard, and a love.  
Can I forget you, being as ye were  
So beautiful among the pleasant fields  
In which ye stood? Or can I here forget  
530 The plain and seemly countenance with which  
Ye dealt out your plain comforts? Yet had ye  
Delights and exultations of your own:  
Eager and never weary we pursued  
Our home amusements by the warm peat fire  
535 At evening, when with pencil and with slate,  
In square divisions parcelled out, and all  
With crosses and with cyphers scribbled o'er,<sup>o</sup>  
We schemed and puzzled, head opposed to head,

540 In strife too humble to be named in verse;  
Or round the naked table, snow-white deal,<sup>o</sup>  
Cherry, or maple, sate in close array,  
And to the combat—lu or whist—led on  
A thick-ribbed army, not as in the world  
Neglected and ungratefully thrown by  
545 Even for the very service they had wrought,  
But husbanded through many a long campaign.  
Uncouth assemblage was it, where no few  
Had changed their functions—some, plebeian cards  
Which fate beyond the promise of their birth  
550 Had glorified, and called to represent  
The persons of departed potentates.<sup>4</sup>  
Oh, with what echoes on the board they fell!  
Ironical diamonds—clubs, hearts, diamonds, spades,  
A congregation piteously akin.  
555 Cheap matter did they give to boyish wit,  
Those sooty knaves, precipitated down  
With scoffs and taunts like Vulcan<sup>5</sup> out of heaven;  
The paramount ace, a moon in her eclipse;  
Queens, gleaming through their splendour's last  
560 decay;  
And monarchs, surly at the wrongs sustained  
By royal visages. Meanwhile abroad  
The heavy rain was falling, or the frost  
Raged bitterly with keen and silent tooth;  
And, interrupting the impassioned game,  
565 From Esthwaite's neighbouring lake the splitting ice,  
While it sank down towards the water, sent  
Among the meadows and the hills its long  
And dismal yellings, like the noise of wolves  
When they are howling round the Bothnic main.<sup>o</sup>  
570

Nor, sedulous<sup>o</sup> as I have been to trace  
How Nature by extrinsic passion first

Peopled my mind with beauteous forms or grand  
And made me love them, may I well forget  
How other pleasures have been mine, and joys  
575 Of subtler origin—how I have felt,  
Not seldom, even in that tempestuous time,  
Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense  
Which seem in their simplicity to own  
An intellectual<sup>o</sup> charm, that calm delight  
580 Which, if I err not, surely must belong  
To those first-born<sup>o</sup> affinities that fit  
Our new existence to existing things,  
And, in our dawn of being, constitute  
The bond of union betwixt life and joy.  
585

Yes, I remember when the changeful earth  
And twice five seasons on my mind had stamped  
The faces of the moving year, even then,  
A child, I held unconscious intercourse  
With the eternal beauty, drinking in  
590 A pure organic pleasure from the lines  
Of curling mist, or from the level plain  
Of waters coloured by the steady clouds.  
The sands of Westmoreland, the creeks and bays  
Of Cumbria's<sup>o</sup> rocky limits, they can tell  
595 How when the sea threw off his evening shade  
And to the shepherd's huts beneath the crags  
Did send sweet notice of the rising moon,  
How I have stood, to fancies such as these,  
Engrafted in the tenderness of thought,  
600 A stranger, linking with the spectacle  
No conscious memory of a kindred sight,  
And bringing with me no peculiar sense  
Of quietness or peace—yet I have stood  
Even while mine eye has moved o'er three long  
605 leagues<sup>o</sup>  
Of shining water, gathering, as it seemed,

Through every hair-breadth of that field of light  
New pleasure, like a bee among the flowers.

Thus often in those fits of vulgar<sup>o</sup> joy  
Which through all seasons on a child's pursuits  
610 Are prompt attendants, 'mid that giddy bliss  
Which like a tempest works along the blood  
And is forgotten, even then I felt  
Gleams like the flashing of a shield. The earth  
And common face of Nature spake to me  
615 Rememberable things; sometimes, 'tis true,  
By chance collisions and quaint accidents—  
Like those ill-sorted unions, work supposed  
Of evil-minded fairies—yet not vain  
Nor profitless, if haply they impressed  
620 Collateral<sup>o</sup> objects and appearances,  
Albeit lifeless then, and doomed to sleep  
Until maturer seasons called them forth  
To impregnate and to elevate the mind.  
And if the vulgar joy by its own weight  
625 Wearied itself out of the memory,  
The scenes which were a witness of that joy  
Remained, in their substantial lineaments  
Depicted on the brain, and to the eye  
Were visible, a daily sight. And thus  
630 By the impressive discipline of fear,  
By pleasure and repeated happiness—  
So frequently repeated—and by force  
Of obscure feelings representative  
Of joys that were forgotten, these same scenes,  
635 So beauteous and majestic in themselves,  
Though yet the day was distant, did at length  
Become habitually dear, and all  
Their hues and forms were by invisible links  
Allied to the affections.

640 I began  
My story early, feeling, as I fear,  
The weakness of a human love for days  
Disowned by memory—ere the birth of spring  
Planting my snowdrops among winter snows.<sup>6</sup>  
Nor will it seem to thee, my friend, so prompt  
645 In sympathy, that I have lengthened out  
With fond and feeble tongue a tedious tale.  
Meanwhile my hope has been that I might fetch  
Invigorating thoughts from former years,  
Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,  
650 And haply meet reproaches too, whose power  
May spur me on, in manhood now mature,  
To honorable toil. Yet should these hopes  
Be vain, and thus should neither I be taught  
To understand myself, nor thou to know  
655 With better knowledge how the heart was framed  
Of him thou lovest, need I dread from thee  
Harsh judgments if I am so loth to quit  
Those recollected hours that have the charm  
Of visionary things,<sup>7</sup> and lovely forms  
660 And sweet sensations, that throw back our life  
And almost make our infancy itself  
A visible scene on which the sun is shining?

One end hereby at least hath been attained—  
My mind hath been revived—and if this mood  
665 Desert me not, I will forthwith bring down  
Through later years the story of my life.  
The road lies plain before me. 'Tis a theme  
Single and of determined bounds, and hence  
I chuse it rather at this time than work  
670 Of ampler or more varied argument,  
Where I might be discomfited and lost,  
And certain hopes are with me that to thee

This labour will be welcome, honoured friend.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: One of many echoes from *Paradise Lost*, where the line is applied to Adam and Eve as they begin their new life after the fall and their expulsion from Eden: "The world was all before them" (12.646).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: This opening passage (lines 1–54), which Wordsworth wrote in 1799, and which in book 7, line 4, he will call his "glad preamble," replaces a traditional epic's opening prayer to the Muse for inspiration. To be "inspired" is literally to be breathed or blown into by a divinity (in Latin *spirare* means both "to breathe" and "to blow"). The "breath of heaven" that blows on the poet's body in lines 41–42, answered by a breeze within (lines 42–43), fills that role here.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to whom Wordsworth addresses the whole of *The Prelude*. For Coleridge's response, see "To William Wordsworth" (pp. 516–18, below).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth says that his poetry usually originates in "emotion recollected in tranquillity"; hence not, as in the preamble of lines 1–54, during the experience that it records.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, willing to prolong the passion.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Grasmere, where Wordsworth settled with his sister, Dorothy, in December 1799.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The work is *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth planned as his major poetic work but never finished.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Influences to which his soul responded as an Eolian harp, placed in an open window, responds with music to gusts of a breeze. For a description of this instrument, named for Aeolus, the classical god of the winds, see Coleridge's *The Eolian Harp*, p. 471, n. 1, below.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: That time of rest.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: An echo of Milton's description in *Paradise Lost* of the original act of creation: the Holy Spirit, whom Milton calls on for inspiration, "Dovelike satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad'st it pregnant" (1.21–22).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In *Paradise Lost* 9.24–41 Milton relates that, in seeking a subject for his epic poem, he considered then rejected the "fabled Knights" of medieval romance.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3:  
Mithridates VI, king of Pontus in Asia Minor, was defeated by the Roman general Pompey in 66 B.C.E. Wordsworth finds epic potential in the legend that, following this defeat, he (in some versions, one of his chieftains) led his people in migration from Asia, north to Scandinavia; there he so impressed the inhabitants with his power that he was able to make them take him for a god, becoming the real-life prototype for the Norse god of war, Odin. In 1796 Coleridge and Robert Southey co-wrote an essay for Coleridge's journal *The Watchman* that retold this story, emphasizing Odin's choice of a dangerous freedom over Roman subjugation. This account of Odin links  
[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Sertorius, a Roman general temporarily allied with Mithridates, sought to establish an independent Roman republic in Spain. Following his assassination in 72 B.C.E. the republic was crushed, but there is a legend that his followers fled to the Canary Islands (known then as the "Fortunate Islands," line 191), where their descendants flourished until the arrival of Spanish conquistadors late in the 15th century.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Dominique de Gourges, a French gentleman who went in 1568 to Florida to avenge the massacre of the French by the Spaniards there [*Wordsworth's note* in the 1850 Prelude].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Gustavus Vassa (1496–1530) worked to advance Sweden's liberation from Danish rule while concealing himself in



- his country's Dalecarlia mines.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: William Wallace, Scottish patriot, fought against the English until captured and executed in 1304. See Robert Burns's "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," pp. 185–86, above.[Return to reference 7](#)
  - Note 8: That is, *The Recluse*.[Return to reference 8](#)
  - Note 9: The lyre of Orpheus. In Greek myth the singing and playing of Orpheus, a traditional figure for the powers of poetry, enchanted both humans and the natural world.[Return to reference 9](#)
  - Note 1: The reference is to Christ's parable of the steward who fails to use his talents (literally, the coins his master has entrusted to him and, figuratively, his God-given abilities) in Matthew 25:14–30.[Return to reference 1](#)
  - Note 2: The two-part *Prelude* that Wordsworth wrote in 1798–99 begins with this abrupt question.[Return to reference 2](#)
  - Note 3: Quoting Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," line 28 (p. 510, below).[Return to reference 3](#)
  - Note 4: The Derwent River flows by Cockermouth Castle and then past the garden terrace behind Wordsworth's childhood residence in Cockermouth, Cumbria.[Return to reference 4](#)
  - Note 5: The current that drives a mill wheel.[Return to reference 5](#)
  - Note 6: Or groundsel, a common European weed.[Return to reference 6](#)
  - Note 7: One of the highest peaks in the Lake District, nine miles east of Cockermouth.[Return to reference 7](#)
  - Note 8: That is, in America.[Return to reference 8](#)
  - Note 9: The valley of Esthwaite, thirty-five miles from Cockermouth, where Wordsworth attended school after 1779.[Return to reference 9](#)
  - Note 1: Snares or labors.[Return to reference 1](#)
  - Note 2: To direct his boat in a straight line, the rower (sitting facing the stern of the boat) has fixed his eye on a point on the ridge above the nearby shore, which blocks out the landscape behind.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Moved off obliquely.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The cards for these games of loo and whist have changed their functions in ways that remind us that *The Prelude* was begun soon after the downfall of the French monarchy during the Revolution. The “potentate” cards—the kings, queens, and jacks—have over time been lost from the pack and so selected “plebeian,” or commoner, cards have come to be used in their place.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Roman god of fire and the forge. His mother, Juno, when he was born lame, threw him down from Olympus, home of the gods.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, he fears that he may have mistakenly attributed his later thoughts to a time of life he can no longer remember.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Things seen in a vision.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *London's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *anticipation*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *abundant*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *springtime*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *verses*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *secluded dwelling*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rejoicing*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *invest*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mental images*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *customs*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fosters tenderly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *solemn*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *distinguish*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lack*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *carefulness*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *total inaction*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *luxuriously*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *unfaithful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prohibition*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foretaste*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bird snares*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *petty*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *result*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *perhaps*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *small boat*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *endowed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *lowly, commonplace*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *on skates*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *daily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *succession*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *signs*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *seethe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *racehorse*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tic-tac-toe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *pine or fir*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Baltic Sea*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *diligent*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *spiritual*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *innate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Cumberland's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *about 9 miles*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ordinary*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *secondary*[Return to reference](#) °

***From Book Second.***

***School-time (Continued)***

## ["BLESSED THE INFANT BABE"]

\* \* \*

Those incidental charms which first attached  
My heart to rural objects, day by day  
Grew weaker, and I hasten on to tell  
205 How Nature, intervenient<sup>1</sup> till this time  
And secondary, now at length was sought  
For her own sake. But who shall<sup>2</sup> parcel out  
His intellect by geometric rules,  
Split like a province into round and square?  
210 Who knows the individual hour in which  
His habits were first sown even as a seed,  
Who that shall point as with a wand, and say  
'This portion of the river of my mind  
Came from yon fountain'? Thou, my friend, art one  
215 More deeply read in thy own thoughts; to thee  
Science<sup>3</sup> appears but what in truth she is,  
Not as our glory and our absolute boast,  
But as a succedaneum,<sup>4</sup> and a prop  
To our infirmity. Thou art no slave  
220 Of that false secondary power by which  
In weakness we create distinctions, then  
Deem that our puny boundaries are things  
Which we perceive, and not which we have made.  
To thee, unblinded by these outward shows,  
225 The unity of all has been revealed;  
And thou wilt doubt with me, less aptly skilled  
Than many are to class the cabinet  
Of their sensations,<sup>5</sup> and in voluble phrase<sup>o</sup>  
230 Run through the history and birth of each  
As of a single independent thing.

Hard task to analyse a soul, in which  
Not only general habits and desires,  
But each most obvious and particular thought—  
Not in a mystical and idle sense,  
But in the words of reason deeply weighed—  
235 Hath no beginning.

Blessed the infant babe—  
For with my best conjectures I would trace  
The progress of our being—blest the babe  
Nursed in his mother's arms, the babe who sleeps  
240 Upon his mother's breast, who, when his soul  
Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,  
Doth gather passion from his mother's eye.<sup>6</sup>  
Such feelings pass into his torpid life  
Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind,  
245 Even in the first trial of its powers,  
Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine  
In one appearance all the elements  
And parts of the same object, else detached  
And loth to coalesce. Thus day by day  
250 Subjected to the discipline of love,  
His organs and recipient faculties  
Are quickened, are more vigorous; his mind spreads,  
Tenacious of<sup>o</sup> the forms which it receives  
In one beloved presence—nay and more,  
255 In that most apprehensive habitude<sup>7</sup>  
And those sensations which have been derived  
From this beloved presence—there exists  
A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
All objects through all intercourse of sense.  
260 No outcast he, bewildered and depressed;  
Along his infant veins are interfused  
The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of Nature that connect him with the world.<sup>8</sup>

265 Emphatically such a being lives,  
An inmate of<sup>o</sup> this *active* universe.  
From Nature largely he receives, nor so  
Is satisfied, but largely gives again;  
For feeling has to him imparted strength,  
270 And—powerful in all sentiments of grief,  
Of exultation, fear and joy—his mind,  
Even as an agent of the one great mind,  
Creates, creator and receiver both,  
Working but in alliance with the works  
Which it beholds.<sup>9</sup> Such, verily, is the first  
275 Poetic spirit of our human life—  
By uniform controul of after years  
In most abated and suppressed, in some  
Through every change of growth or of decay  
Preeminent till death.

280  
From early days,  
Beginning not long after that first time  
In which, a babe, by intercourse of touch  
I held mute dialogues with my mother's heart,<sup>1</sup>  
I have endeavoured to display the means  
Whereby the infant sensibility,  
285 Great birthright of our being, was in me  
Augmented and sustained. Yet is a path  
More difficult before me, and I fear  
That in its broken windings we shall need  
The chamois'<sup>o</sup> sinews and the eagle's wing.  
290 For now a trouble came into my mind  
From unknown causes, I was left alone  
Seeking the visible world, nor knowing why.  
The props of my affections were removed,<sup>2</sup>  
And yet the building stood, as if sustained  
295 By its own spirit. All that I beheld  
Was dear to me, and from this cause it came

That now to Nature's finer influxes<sup>o</sup>  
My mind lay open—to that more exact  
And intimate communion which our hearts  
300 Maintain with the minuter properties  
Of objects which already are beloved,  
And of those only.

Many are the joys  
Of youth, but, oh, what happiness to live  
When every hour brings palpable access  
305 Of knowledge, when all knowledge is delight,  
And sorrow is not there. The seasons came,  
And every season to my notice brought  
A store of transitory qualities  
Which but for this most watchful power of love  
310 Had been neglected, left a register  
Of permanent relations else unknown.<sup>3</sup>  
Hence, life, and change, and beauty, solitude  
More active even than 'best society',<sup>4</sup>  
Society made sweet as solitude  
315 By silent inobtrusive sympathies,  
And gentle agitations of the mind  
From manifold distinctions, difference  
Perceived in things where to the common eye  
No difference is, and hence, from the same source,  
320 Sublimer joy. For I would walk alone  
In storm and tempest, or in starlight nights  
Beneath the quiet heavens, and at that time  
Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound  
To breathe an elevated mood, by form  
325 Or image unprofaned; and I would stand  
Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are  
The ghostly<sup>o</sup> language of the ancient earth,  
Or make their dim abode in distant winds.  
Thence did I drink the visionary power.



330 I deem not profitless those fleeting moods  
Of shadowy exultation; not for this,  
That they are kindred to our purer mind  
And intellectual life,<sup>5</sup> but that the soul—  
335 Remembering how she felt, but what she felt  
Remembering not—retains an obscure sense  
Of possible sublimity, to which  
With growing faculties she doth aspire,  
With faculties still growing, feeling still  
340 That whatsoever point they gain they still  
Have something to pursue.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: That is, entering only incidentally into his other concerns.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, who is able to.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In the older sense: learning.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In medicine a drug substituted for a different drug. Wordsworth, however, uses the term to signify a remedy.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: To classify feelings as if they were exhibits in a display case.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Like modern psychologists, Wordsworth recognized the importance of earliest infancy in the development of the individual mind.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Relationship (“habitude”) most suited to the apprehension of the world.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The infant, in the sense of security and love that is shed by his mother’s presence, perceives what would otherwise be an alien world as a place to which he is connected, in a “filial bond” (line 263).[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: The mind partially creates, by altering, the world it seems simply to perceive.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, both infant and mother feel the pulse of the other's heart.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wordsworth's mother died the month before his eighth birthday.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, had it not been for the "watchful power of love" (line 310), the "transitory qualities" (line 309) would have been neglected, and the "permanent relations" now recorded in his memory would have been unknown.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A partial quotation of a line spoken by Adam to Eve in *Paradise Lost* 9.249: "For solitude sometimes is best society."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, not because they are related to the nonsensuous ("intellectual") aspect of life.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *fluent words*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *holding fast to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dweller in*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mountain antelope's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *influences*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *disembodied*[Return to reference °](#)

## [ADDRESS TO COLERIDGE]

Thou, my friend, wert reared  
In the great city, 'mid far other scenes,<sup>6</sup>  
But we by different roads at length have gained  
The self-same bourne.<sup>°</sup> And for this cause to thee  
I speak unapprehensive of contempt,  
470 The insinuated scoff of coward tongues,  
And all that silent language which so oft  
In conversation betwixt man and man  
Blots from the human countenance all trace  
Of beauty and of love. For thou hast sought  
475 The truth in solitude, and thou art one  
The most intense of Nature's worshippers,  
In many things my brother, chiefly here  
In this my deep devotion. Fare thee well.  
Health and the quiet of a healthful mind  
480 Attend thee, seeking oft the haunts of men—  
And yet more often living with thyself,  
And for thyself—so haply shall thy days  
Be many, and a blessing to mankind.

## Endnotes

- Note 6: A reminiscence of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," lines 51–52: "For I was reared / In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim." The two-part *Prelude* Wordsworth completed in 1799 ended with the address to Coleridge in lines 467–84.[Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *destination* [Return to reference °](#)

***From Book Fifth.***

***Books***

## [THE DREAM OF THE ARAB]

\* \* \*

Thou also, man, hast wrought,  
For commerce of thy nature with itself,<sup>1</sup>  
Things worthy of unconquerable life;  
And yet we feel—we cannot chuse but feel—  
20 That these must perish. Tremblings of the heart  
It gives, to think that the immortal being  
No more shall need such garments;<sup>2</sup> and yet man,  
As long as he shall be the child of earth,  
Might almost 'weep to have' what he may lose<sup>3</sup>—  
25 Nor be himself extinguished, but survive  
Abject, depressed, forlorn, disconsolate.  
A thought is with me sometimes, and I say,  
'Should earth by inward throes be wrenched  
throughout,  
Or fire be sent from far to wither all  
30 Her pleasant habitations, and dry up  
Old Ocean in his bed, left singed and bare,  
Yet would the living presence still subsist  
Victorious; and composure would ensue,  
And kindlings like the morning—presage sure,  
35 Though slow perhaps, of a returning day.'  
But all the meditations of mankind,  
Yea, all the adamantine holds<sup>o</sup> of truth  
By reason built, or passion (which itself  
Is highest reason in a soul sublime),  
40 The consecrated works of bard and sage,  
Sensuous or intellectual, wrought by men,  
Twin labourers and heirs of the same hopes—  
Where would they be? Oh, why hath not the mind

45       Some element to stamp her image on  
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?  
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad  
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

One day, when in the hearing of a friend  
I had given utterance to thoughts like these,  
50       He answered with a smile that in plain truth  
'Twas going far to seek disquietude—  
But on the front of his reproof confessed  
That he at sundry seasons had himself  
Yielded to kindred hauntings, and, forthwith,  
55       Added that once upon a summer's noon  
While he was sitting in a rocky cave  
By the seaside, perusing as it chanced,  
The famous history of the errant knight  
Recorded by Cervantes,<sup>4</sup> these same thoughts  
60       Came to him, and to height unusual rose  
While listlessly he sate, and, having closed  
The book, had turned his eyes towards the sea.  
On poetry and geometric truth  
(The knowledge that endures) upon these two,  
65       And their high privilege of lasting life  
Exempt from all internal injury,  
He mused—upon these chiefly—and at length,  
His senses yielding to the sultry air,  
Sleep seized him and he passed into a dream.  
70       He saw before him an Arabian waste,  
A desert, and he fancied that himself  
Was sitting there in the wide wilderness  
Alone upon the sands. Distress of mind  
Was growing in him when, behold, at once  
75       To his great joy a man was at his side,  
Upon a dromedary<sup>o</sup> mounted high.  
He seemed an arab of the Bedouin tribes;<sup>5</sup>

A lance he bore, and underneath one arm  
A stone, and in the opposite hand a shell  
80 Of a surpassing brightness. Much rejoiced  
The dreaming man that he should have a guide  
To lead him through the desert; and he thought,  
While questioning himself what this strange freight  
Which the newcomer carried through the waste  
85 Could mean, the arab told him that the stone—  
To give it in the language of the dream—  
Was *Euclid's Elements*.<sup>6</sup> 'And this', said he,  
'This other', pointing to the shell, 'this book  
Is something of more worth.' 'And, at the word,  
90 The stranger', said my friend continuing,  
'Stretched forth the shell towards me, with command  
That I should hold it to my ear. I did so  
And heard that instant in an unknown tongue,  
Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,  
95 A loud prophetic blast of harmony,  
An ode in passion uttered, which foretold  
Destruction to the children of the earth  
By deluge now at hand. No sooner ceased  
The song, but with calm look the arab said  
100 That all was true, that it was even so  
As had been spoken, and that he himself  
Was going then to bury those two books—  
The one that held acquaintance with the stars,  
And wedded man to man by purest bond  
105 Of nature, undisturbed by space or time;  
Th' other that was a god, yea many gods,  
Had voices more than all the winds, and was  
A joy, a consolation, and a hope.'  
My friend continued, 'Strange as it may seem  
110 I wondered not, although I plainly saw  
The one to be a stone, th' other a shell,  
Nor doubted once but that they both were books,

Having a perfect faith in all that passed.  
A wish was now engendered in my fear  
115 To cleave unto this man, and I begged leave  
To share his errand with him. On he passed  
Not heeding me; I followed, and took note  
That he looked often backward with wild look,  
Grasping his twofold treasure to his side.  
120 Upon a dromedary, lance in rest,  
He rode, I keeping pace with him; and now  
I fancied that he was the very knight  
Whose tale Cervantes tells, yet not the knight,  
But was an arab of the desert too,  
125 Of these was neither, and was both at once.  
His countenance meanwhile grew more disturbed,  
And looking backwards when he looked I saw  
A glittering light, and asked him whence it came.  
"It is", said he, "the waters of the deep  
130 Gathering upon us." Quickening then his pace  
He left me; I called after him aloud;  
He heeded not, but with his twofold charge  
Beneath his arm—before me full in view—  
I saw him riding o'er the desert sands  
135 With the fleet waters of the drowning world  
In chace of him; whereat I waked in terror,  
And saw the sea before me, and the book  
In which I had been reading at my side.<sup>7</sup>

Full often, taking from the world of sleep  
140 This arab phantom which my friend beheld,  
This semi-Quixote, I to him have given  
A substance, fancied him a living man—  
A gentle dweller in the desert, crazed  
By love, and feeling, and internal thought  
145 Protracted among endless solitudes—  
Have shaped him, in the oppression of his brain,  
Wandering upon this quest and thus equipped.



And I have scarcely pitied him, have felt  
A reverence for a being thus employed,  
150 And thought that in the blind and awful lair  
Of such a madness reason did lie couched.  
Enow<sup>o</sup> there are on earth to take in charge  
Their wives, their children, and their virgin loves,  
Or whatsoever else the heart holds dear—  
155 Enow to think of these—yea, will I say,  
In sober contemplation of the approach  
Of such great overthrow, made manifest  
By certain evidence, that I methinks  
Could share that maniac's anxiousness, could go  
160 Upon like errand. Oftentimes at least  
Me hath such deep entrancement half-possessed  
When I have held a volume in my hand—  
Poor earthly casket of immortal verse—  
Shakespeare or Milton, labourers divine.  
165

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: From the works of God's creation, Nature, Wordsworth turns at this point in *The Prelude* to human creations. Man, as well as God, has created works by which to communicate with man ("commerce of thy nature with itself"): those creations are books, and the title of book 5 underlines their importance to Wordsworth's account of himself. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wordsworth draws on the traditional image of the body as the garment of the soul, no longer needed at death and so discarded. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The quotation is from Shakespeare's sonnet 64, in which the thought that Time might come and take his love away is for the speaker "as a death, which cannot choose / But weep to have that which it fears to lose." [Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: That is, *Don Quixote*, the 17th-century novel about a man unable to distinguish between reality and books' romantic fictions.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Mathematics had flourished in Arabic culture—hence the Arab rider.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Celebrated book on geometry and the theory of numbers by the Greek mathematician Euclid (3rd century B.C.E.); it continued to be used as a textbook into the 19th century.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A late 17th-century biography reported that on a single night in 1619 three dreams troubled René Descartes, who believed them to be a supernatural visitation foretelling his future vocation as a philosopher. The third dream, which has had many interpreters, involved two books that appeared mysteriously to the dreamer and then vanished again, a dictionary and an anthology of poetry. Coleridge is usually thought to have told the story of that dream to Wordsworth, who in lines 56–139 reworks it brilliantly.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *indestructible fortresses*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *camel*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *enough*[Return to reference °](#)

## [THE BOY OF WINANDER; THE DROWNED MAN]

There was a boy<sup>8</sup>—ye knew him well, ye cliffs  
And islands of Winander—many a time  
390 At evening, when the stars had just begun  
To move along the edges of the hills,  
Rising or setting, would he stand alone  
Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,  
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands  
395 Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth  
Uplifted, he as through an instrument  
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls  
That they might answer him. And they would shout  
Across the wat'ry vale, and shout again,  
400 Responsive to his call, with quivering peals  
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud,  
Redoubled and redoubled—concourse wild  
Of mirth and jocund din. And when it chanced  
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,  
405 Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung  
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize  
Has carried far into his heart<sup>9</sup> the voice  
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene  
Would enter unawares into his mind  
410 With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,  
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received  
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

This boy was taken from his mates, and died  
In childhood ere he was full ten years old.  
415 Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,  
The vale where he was born; the churchyard hangs  
Upon a slope above the village school,  
And there, along that bank, when I have passed

At evening, I believe that oftentimes  
420 A full half-hour together I have stood  
Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies.  
Even now methinks I have before my sight  
That self-same village church: I see her sit—  
The thronèd lady spoken of erewhile—  
425 On her green hill, forgetful of this boy  
Who slumbers at her feet, forgetful too  
Of all her silent neighbourhood of graves,  
And listening only to the gladsome sounds  
That, from the rural school ascending, play  
430 Beneath her and about her. May she long  
Behold a race of young ones like to those  
With whom I herded—easily, indeed,  
We might have fed upon a fatter soil  
Of Arts and Letters, but be that forgiven—  
435 A race of real children, not too wise,  
Too learned, or too good, but wanton, fresh,  
And bandied up and down by love and hate;  
Fierce, moody, patient, venturous, modest, shy,  
Mad at their sports like withered leaves in winds;  
440 Though doing wrong and suffering, and full oft  
Bending beneath our life's mysterious weight  
Of pain and fear, yet still in happiness  
Not yielding to the happiest upon earth.  
Simplicity in habit, truth in speech,  
445 Be these the daily strengtheners of their minds!  
May books and Nature be their early joy,  
And knowledge, rightly honored with that name—  
Knowledge not purchased with the loss of power!  
Well do I call to mind the very week  
450 When I was first entrusted to the care  
Of that sweet valley<sup>1</sup>—when its paths, its shores  
And brooks, were like a dream of novelty  
To my half-infant thoughts—that very week,

455 While I was roving up and down alone  
 Seeking I knew not what, I chanced to cross  
 One of those open fields, which, shaped like ears,  
 Make green peninsulas on Esthwaite's Lake.  
 Twilight was coming on, yet through the gloom  
 I saw distinctly on the opposite shore  
 460 A heap of garments, left as I supposed  
 By one who there was bathing. Long I watched,  
 But no one owned them; meanwhile the calm lake  
 Grew dark, with all the shadows on its breast,  
 And now and then a fish up-leaping snapped  
 465 The breathless stillness. The succeeding day—  
 Those unclaimed garments telling a plain tale—  
 Went there a company, and in their boat  
 Sounded with grappling-irons and long poles:  
 At length, the dead man, 'mid that beauteous scene  
 470 Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright  
 Rose with his ghastly face, a spectre shape—  
 Of terror even. And yet no vulgar fear,  
 Young as I was, a child not nine years old,  
 Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen  
 475 Such sights before among the shining streams  
 Of fairyland, the forests of romance—  
 Thence came a spirit hallowing what I saw  
 With decoration and ideal grace,  
 A dignity, a smoothness, like the works  
 480 Of Grecian art and purest poesy.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 8: In an early manuscript version of lines 389–413, Wordsworth uses the first-person pronoun, suggesting the boy's experience was his own. Under the title "There Was a Boy," the

lines were published as a separate poem in Wordsworth's 1815 *Poems*. In the preface to that volume Wordsworth describes how the account of the boy's listening dramatizes a moment when internal feelings cooperate with external accidents and "plant, for immortality, images of sound and sight, in the celestial soil of the Imagination." [Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Thomas De Quincey responded to this line in *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*: "This very expression, 'far,' by which space and its infinities are attributed to the human heart, and to its capacities of re-echoing the sublimities of nature, has always struck me as with a flash of sublime revelation." [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: At age nine Wordsworth was sent away from home to attend school at Hawkshead in the Esthwaite valley. [Return to reference 1](#)

***From Book Sixth.***

***Cambridge and the Alps***

## [“HUMAN NATURE SEEMING BORN AGAIN”]

\* \* \*

When the third summer brought its liberty<sup>1</sup>  
A fellow student and myself, he too  
A mountaineer, together sallied forth,  
340 And, staff in hand on foot pursued our way  
Towards the distant Alps. An open slight  
Of college cares and study was the scheme,<sup>2</sup>  
Nor entertained without concern for those  
To whom my worldly interests were dear,  
345 But Nature then was sovereign in my heart,  
And mighty forms seizing a youthful fancy  
Had given a charter<sup>3</sup> to irregular hopes.  
In any age, without an impulse sent  
From work of nations and their goings-on,  
350 I should have been possessed by like desire;  
But 'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced,  
France standing on the top of golden hours,  
And human nature seeming born again.  
Bound, as I said, to the Alps, it was our lot  
355 To land at Calais on the very eve  
Of that great federal day;<sup>4</sup> and there we saw,  
In a mean<sup>o</sup> city and among a few,  
How bright a face is worn when joy of one  
Is joy of tens of millions.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes



- Note 1: Wordsworth was a student at St. John's College, Cambridge University, from 1787 to 1791. Books 3 and 4 describe his first year there and the succeeding summer vacation. In this book, after reviewing briefly his second and third years at university, Wordsworth describes his trip through France and Switzerland with a college friend, Robert Jones, during the summer vacation of 1790. France was then in the "golden hours" of the early period of the Revolution; the fall of the Bastille had occurred on July 14 of the preceding year.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Undergraduates were expected to spend their third summer preparing for the final examinations that would determine their rank upon graduation and shape their career prospects.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Privileged freedom.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Wordsworth and Jones landed at the port of Calais in northeast France on July 13, 1790, just before the Festival of Federation, the ceremony, also marking the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, in which King Louis XVI swore to be faithful to the nation's new, democratic constitution.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *lowly*[Return to reference °](#)

## [CROSSING SIMPLON PASS]

'Tis not my present purpose to retrace  
That variegated journey step by step;  
A march it was of military speed,  
And earth did change her images and forms  
Before us fast as clouds are changed in heaven.  
430 Day after day, up early and down late,  
From vale to vale, from hill to hill we went,  
From province on to province did we pass,  
Keen hunters in a chace of fourteen weeks—  
Eager as birds of prey, or as a ship  
435 Upon the stretch when winds are blowing fair.  
Sweet coverts did we cross of pastoral life,  
Enticing vallies—greeted them, and left  
Too soon, while yet the very flash and gleam  
Of salutation were not passed away.  
440 Oh, sorrow for the youth who could have seen  
Unchastened, unsubdued, unawed, unraised  
To patriarchal dignity of mind  
And pure simplicity of wish and will,  
Those sanctified abodes of peaceful man.  
445 My heart leaped up when first I did look down  
On that which was first seen of those deep haunts,  
A green recess, an aboriginal<sup>o</sup> vale,  
Quiet, and lorded over and possessed  
By naked huts, wood-built, and sown like tents  
450 Or Indian cabins over the fresh lawns  
And by the river-side.

That day we first  
Beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved  
To have a soulless image on the eye  
Which had usurped upon a living thought

455 That never more could be.<sup>5</sup> The wondrous Vale  
Of Chamouny<sup>6</sup> did, on the following dawn,  
With its dumb<sup>o</sup> cataracts and streams of ice—  
A motionless array of mighty waves,  
460 Five rivers broad and vast—make rich amends,  
And reconciled us to realities.  
There small birds warble from the leafy trees,  
The eagle soareth in the element,  
There doth the reaper bind the yellow sheaf,  
465 The maiden spread the haycock in the sun,  
While Winter like a tamèd lion walks,  
Descending from the mountain to make sport  
Among the cottages by beds of flowers.

Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld  
Or heard was fitted to our unripe state  
470 Of intellect and heart. By simple strains  
Of feeling, the pure breath of real life,  
We were not left untouched. With such a book  
Before our eyes we could not chuse but read  
A frequent lesson of sound tenderness,  
475 The universal reason of mankind,  
The truth of young and old. Nor, side by side  
Pacing, two brother pilgrims, or alone  
Each with his humour,<sup>o</sup> could we fail to abound—  
Craft this which hath been hinted at before—  
480 In dreams and fictions pensively composed:  
Dejection taken up for pleasure's sake,  
And gilded sympathies, the willow wreath,<sup>7</sup>  
Even among those solitudes sublime,  
And sober posies of funereal flowers,  
485 Culled from the gardens of the Lady Sorrow,  
Did sweeten many a meditative hour.

Yet still in me, mingling with these delights,  
Was something of stern mood, an under-thirst

Of vigour, never utterly asleep.  
490 Far different dejection once was mine—  
A deep and genuine sadness then I felt—  
The circumstances I will here relate  
Even as they were. Upturning with a band  
Of travellers, from the Valais we had clomb<sup>o</sup>  
495 Along the road that leads to Italy;<sup>8</sup>  
A length of hours, making of these our guides,  
Did we advance, and, having reached an inn  
Among the mountains, we together ate  
Our noon's repast, from which the travellers rose  
500 Leaving us at the board. Erelong we followed,  
Descending by the beaten road that led  
Right to a rivulet's edge, and there broke off;  
The only track now visible was one  
Upon the further side, right opposite,  
505 And up a lofty mountain. This we took,  
After a little scruple<sup>o</sup> and short pause,  
And climbed with eagerness—though not, at length,  
Without surprize and some anxiety  
On finding that we did not overtake  
510 Our comrades gone before. By fortunate chance,  
While every moment now encreased our doubts,  
A peasant met us, and from him we learned  
That to the place which had perplexed us first  
We must descend, and there should find the road  
515 Which in the stony channel of the stream  
Lay a few steps, and then along its banks—  
And further, that thenceforward all our course  
Was downwards with the current of that stream.  
Hard of belief, we questioned him again,  
520 And all the answers which the man returned  
To our inquiries, in their sense and substance  
Translated by the feelings which we had,  
Ended in this—that we had crossed the Alps.<sup>9</sup>

Imagination!—lifting up itself  
525 Before the eye and progress of my song<sup>o</sup>  
Like an unfathered vapour,<sup>1</sup> here that power,  
In all the might of its endowments, came  
Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,  
530 Halted without a struggle to break through,  
And now, recovering, to my soul I say  
'I recognise thy glory'. In such strength  
Of usurpation, in such visitings  
Of awful<sup>o</sup> promise, when the light of sense  
535 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us  
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,  
There harbours whether we be young or old.  
Our destiny, our nature, and our home,  
Is with infinitude—and only there;  
540 With hope it is, hope that can never die,  
Effort, and expectation, and desire,  
And something evermore about to be.  
The mind beneath such banners militant  
Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught  
545 That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts  
That are their own perfection and reward—  
Strong in itself, and in the access of joy  
Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.

The dull and heavy slackening which ensued  
550 Upon those tidings by the peasant given  
Was soon dislodged; downwards we hurried fast,  
And entered with the road which we had missed  
Into a narrow chasm. The brook and road  
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy pass,  
555 And with them did we journey several hours  
At a slow step. The immeasurable height  
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,  
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,

And everywhere along the hollow rent  
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
560 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears—  
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside  
As if a voice were in them—the sick sight  
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,  
565 The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,  
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light,  
Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,  
570 Characters of the great apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of eternity,<sup>2</sup>  
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 5: The “image” is the actual sight of Mont Blanc, as contrasted with what the poet has imagined the famous Swiss mountain to be. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Chamonix, a valley in eastern France, north of Mont Blanc. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The mention of the “willow wreath” suggests that the poetry the two travelers composed to while away their time was conventionally sentimental. “Gilded”: laid on like gilt; superficial. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Simplon Pass. [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: As Dorothy Wordsworth baldly put it later on, “The ambition of youth was disappointed at these tidings.” The visionary experience that follows (lines 525–48) did not occur in the Alps; Wordsworth celebrates the creative power that he experiences at the time of writing this passage, fourteen years after the disappointment at Simplon Pass. [Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Vapor appearing suddenly from no apparent source. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The objects in this natural scene are like the written words (“characters”) of the Apocalypse—that is, of the Book of Revelation, concluding book of the New Testament. “Types”: signs foreshadowing eternity. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: See Revelation 1:8: “I am Alpha and Omega [the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet], the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord.” In *Paradise Lost* 5.153–65 Milton says that all God’s works declare their Creator, and call on all to extol “him first, him last, him midst, and without end.” [Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *primitive, untouched* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *silent* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *temperament* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *climbed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hesitation* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: The Prelude *itself* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *awe-inspiring* [Return to reference °](#)

## ***From Book Seventh.***

### ***Residence in London***

#### **[THE BLIND BEGGAR; BARTHOLOMEW FAIR]**

\* \* \*

595      How often in the overflowing streets<sup>1</sup>  
Have I gone forwards with the crowd, and said  
Unto myself, 'The face of every one  
That passes by me is a mystery.'  
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed  
By thoughts of what, and whither, when and how,  
600      Until the shapes before my eyes became  
A second-sight procession, such as glides  
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams,<sup>2</sup>  
And all the ballast of familiar life—  
The present, and the past, hope, fear, all stays,<sup>3</sup>  
605      All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man—  
Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known.  
And once, far travelled in such mood, beyond  
The reach of common indications, lost  
Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance  
610      Abruptly to be smitten with the view  
Of a blind beggar, who, with upright face,  
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest  
Wearing a written paper, to explain  
The story of the man, and who he was.  
615      My mind did at this spectacle turn round  
As with the might of waters, and it seemed  
To me that in this label was a type



Or emblem of the utmost that we know  
Both of ourselves and of the universe,  
620 And on the shape of this unmoving man,  
His fixèd face and sightless eyes, I looked,  
As if admonished from another world.

Though reared upon the base of outward things,  
These chiefly are such structures as the mind  
625 Builds for itself. Scenes different there are—  
Full-formed—which take, with small internal help,  
Possession of the faculties: the peace  
Of night, for instance, the solemnity  
Of Nature's intermediate hours of rest  
630 When the great tide of human life stands still,  
The business of the day to come unborn,  
Of that gone by locked up as in the grave;<sup>3</sup>  
The calmness, beauty, of the spectacle,  
Sky, stillness, moonshine, empty streets, and sounds  
635 Unfrequent as in desarts;<sup>o</sup> at late hours  
Of winter evenings when unwholesome rains  
Are falling hard, with people yet astir,  
The feeble salutation from the voice  
Of some unhappy woman<sup>4</sup> now and then  
640 Heard as we pass, when no one looks about,  
Nothing is listened to. But these I fear  
Are falsely catalogued:<sup>5</sup> things that are, are not,  
Even as we give them welcome, or assist—  
Are prompt, or are remiss. What say you then  
645 To times when half the city shall break out  
Full of one passion—vengeance, rage, or fear—  
To executions,<sup>6</sup> to a street on fire,  
Mobs, riots, or rejoicings? From those sights  
Take one, an annual festival, the fair  
650 Holden where martyrs suffered in past time,  
And named of St Bartholomew,<sup>7</sup> there see

A work that's finished to our hands, that lays,  
If any spectacle on earth can do,  
The whole creative powers of man asleep.  
655 For once the Muse's help will we implore,  
And she shall lodge us—wafted on her wings  
Above the press and danger of the crowd—  
Upon some showman's platform. What a hell  
For eyes and ears, what anarchy and din  
660 Barbarian and infernal—'tis a dream  
Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sight, sound.  
Below, the open space, through every nook  
Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive  
With heads; the midway region and above  
665 Is thronged with staring pictures and huge scrolls,  
Dumb proclamations of the prodigies;  
And chattering monkeys dangling from their poles,  
And children whirling in their roundabouts;<sup>o</sup>  
With those that stretch the neck, and strain the  
670 eyes,  
And crack the voice in rivalry, the crowd  
Inviting; with buffoons against buffoons  
Grimacing, writhing, screaming; him who grinds  
The hurdy-gurdy,<sup>8</sup> at the fiddle weaves,  
Rattles the salt-box,<sup>9</sup> thumps the kettle-drum,  
675 And him who at the trumpet puffs his cheeks,  
The silver-collared negro with his timbrel,<sup>o</sup>  
Equestrians, tumblers, women, girls, and boys,  
Blue-breeched, pink-vested, and with towering  
plumes.  
All moveables of wonder from all parts  
680 Are here, albinos, painted Indians, dwarfs,  
The horse of knowledge, and the learned pig,<sup>1</sup>  
The stone-eater, the man that swallows fire,  
Giants, ventriloquists, the invisible girl,  
The bust that speaks and moves its goggling eyes,

685 The waxwork,<sup>2</sup> clockwork,<sup>o</sup> all the marvellous craft  
Of modern Merlins,<sup>3</sup> wild beasts, puppet-shows,  
All out-o'-th'-way, far-fetched, perverted things,<sup>4</sup>  
All freaks of Nature, all Promethean<sup>5</sup> thoughts,  
690 Of man—his dulness, madness, and their feats,  
All jumbled up together to make up  
This parliament of monsters. Tents and booths  
Meanwhile—as if the whole were one vast mill<sup>o</sup>—  
Are vomiting, receiving, on all sides,  
695 Men, women, three-years' children, babes in arms.

O, blank confusion, and a type<sup>o</sup> not false  
Of what the mighty city is itself  
To all, except a straggler here and there—  
To the whole swarm of its inhabitants—  
700 An undistinguishable world to men,  
The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,  
Living amid the same perpetual flow  
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced  
To one identity by differences  
That have no law, no meaning, and no end—  
705 Oppression under which even highest minds  
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.  
But though the picture weary out the eye,  
By nature an unmanageable sight,  
It is not wholly so to him who looks  
710 In steadiness, who hath among least things  
An under-sense of greatest, sees the parts  
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.

\* \* \*

735 This did I feel in that vast receptacle.<sup>6</sup>  
The spirit of Nature was upon me here,  
The soul of beauty and enduring life

Was present as a habit, and diffused—  
 Through meagre lines and colours, and the press  
 Of self-destroying, transitory things—  
 Composure and ennobling harmony.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Wordsworth spent a few unhappy months in London in 1791.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: As though other people were seen in a vision or were optical illusions.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Wordsworth's sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" describes a similar response to London when its "mighty heart is lying still" (see p. 388, above).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Perhaps a sex worker.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Mistakenly classified, because what things are depends on the attitude with which they are perceived.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Executions were held in public in England until 1868.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: This four-day-long fair was held every September in commemoration of the martyrdom of the Protestants burned at the stake during the reign of Catholic Queen Mary (1553–58).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A stringed instrument, used by street musicians, which is sounded by a turning wheel rather than a bow.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A crude musical instrument formed of a wooden box containing salt; it was rattled or beaten.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Animals trained to tap out answers to arithmetic questions, etc.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Madame Tussaud brought her collection of wax figures of the leaders and victims of the French Revolution to London in 1802.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Merlin was the legendary magician in the court of King Arthur, but there was a modern Merlin: the Dutch inventor John Joseph Merlin, who in the late 18th century displayed ingenious contrivances at Merlin's Mechanical Museum, a popular place of London entertainment.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Echoing Milton's description of how in Hell "Nature breeds / Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things" (*Paradise Lost* 2.624–25).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Daringly inventive. In Greek myth Prometheus made man out of clay and taught him the arts.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, London.[Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *supports*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wildernesses*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *merry-go-rounds*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tambourine*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *robots*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *factory*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *image*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***From Book Tenth.***

***Residence in France and French Revolution***<sup>[1](#)</sup>

### **Endnotes**

- Note 1: Wordsworth visited France for the second time in 1791–92 and, as he explains in this book, became, initially, a passionate partisan of the Revolution. His lack of money forced him to return to England late in 1792. From there he looked on despairingly as the radicals, led by Robespierre, who ascended to power in France in the summer of 1793, undertook a campaign of mass arrests and executions in order to purge the new Republic of its enemies.[Return to reference 1](#)

## [RETROSPECT: FIRST IMPRESSION OF THE REVOLUTION]

\* \* \*

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy,  
690 For great were the auxiliars<sup>o</sup> which then stood  
Upon our side, we who were strong in love.  
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven! O times,  
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways  
695 Of custom, law, and statute took at once  
The attraction of a country in romance—  
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights  
When most intent on making of herself  
A prime enchanter to assist the work  
700 Which then was going forwards in her name.  
Not favored spots alone, but the whole earth,  
The beauty wore of promise, that which sets  
(To take an image which was felt, no doubt,  
Among the bowers of Paradise itself)  
The budding rose above the rose full-blown.  
705 What temper<sup>o</sup> at the prospect did not wake  
To happiness unthought of? The inert  
Were roused, and lively natures rapt away.<sup>o</sup>  
They who had fed their childhood upon dreams—  
The playfellows of fancy, who had made  
710 All powers of swiftness, subtlety, and strength  
Their ministers, used to stir in lordly wise  
Among the grandest objects of the sense,  
And deal with whatsoever they found there  
As if they had within some lurking right  
715 To wield it—they too, who, of gentle mood,

Had watched all gentle motions, and to these  
Had fitted their own thoughts (schemers more mild,  
And in the region of their peaceful selves),  
720 Did now find helpers to their hearts' desire  
And stuff at hand plastic<sup>o</sup> as they could wish,  
Were called upon to exercise their skill  
Not in Utopia—subterraneous fields,  
Or some secreted island, heaven knows where—  
725 But in the very world which is the world  
Of all of us, the place in which, in the end,  
We find our happiness, or not at all.

\* \* \*

## Notes

- °: *allies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *temperament*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *enraptured*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *malleable*[Return to reference](#) °



## [CRISIS AND RECOVERY]<sup>2</sup>

Time may come  
When some dramatic story may afford  
Shapes livelier to convey to thee, my friend,<sup>o</sup>  
880 What then I learned—or think I learned—of truth,  
And the errors into which I was betrayed  
By present objects, and by reasonings false  
From the beginning, inasmuch as drawn  
885 Out of a heart which had been turned aside  
From Nature by external accidents,  
And which was thus confounded more and more,  
Misguiding and misguided. Thus I fared,  
Dragging all passions, notions, shapes of faith,  
890 Like culprits to the bar,<sup>o</sup> suspiciously  
Calling the mind to establish in plain day  
Her titles<sup>o</sup> and her honours, now believing,  
Now disbelieving, endlessly perplexed  
With impulse, motive, right and wrong, the ground  
895 Of moral obligation—what the rule,  
And what the sanction—till, demanding proof,  
And seeking it in every thing, I lost  
All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,<sup>o</sup>  
Sick, wearied out with contrarities,  
900 Yielded up moral questions in despair,  
And for my future studies, as the sole  
Employment of the inquiring faculty,  
Turned towards mathematics, and their clear  
And solid evidence.

Ah, then it was  
905 That thou, most precious friend, about this time  
First known to me, didst lend a living help  
To regulate my soul. And then it was

That the belovèd woman in whose sight  
Those days were passed—now speaking in a voice  
Of sudden admonition like a brook  
910 That does but cross a lonely road; and now  
Seen, heard and felt, and caught at every turn,  
Companion never lost through many a league—  
Maintained for me a saving intercourse<sup>o</sup>  
With my true self (for, though impaired, and changed  
915 Much, as it seemed, I was no further changed  
Than as a clouded, not a waning moon);  
She, in the midst of all, preserved me still  
A poet, made me seek beneath that name  
My office<sup>o</sup> upon earth, and nowhere else.<sup>3</sup>  
920 And lastly, Nature's self, by human love  
Assisted, through the weary labyrinth  
Conducted me again to open day,  
Revived the feelings of my earlier life,  
Gave me that strength and knowledge full of peace,  
925 Enlarged, and never more to be disturbed,  
Which through the steps of our degeneracy,  
All degradation of this age, hath still  
Upheld me, and upholds me at this day  
In the catastrophe<sup>o</sup> (for so they dream,  
930 And nothing less), when, finally to close  
And rivet up the gains of France, a Pope  
Is summoned in to crown an Emperor<sup>4</sup>—  
This last opprobrium,<sup>o</sup> when we see the dog  
Returning to his vomit,<sup>5</sup> when the sun  
935 That rose in splendour, was alive, and moved  
In exultation among living clouds,  
Hath put his function and his glory off,  
And, turned into a gewgaw,<sup>o</sup> a machine,  
Sets like an opera phantom.<sup>6</sup>  
940

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Wordsworth has been describing the crisis of conscience he experienced when, in February 1793, war broke out between Britain and revolutionary France. This section of book 10 describes his suffering and the start of his recovery.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: After a long separation Dorothy Wordsworth came to live with her brother at Racedown in 1795.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The ultimate blow to liberal hopes for France occurred when on December 2, 1804, Napoleon summoned the pope to officiate at the ceremony elevating him to emperor. At the last moment Napoleon grabbed the crown from the pope and donned it himself.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Allusion to Proverbs 26:11: "As a dog returneth to his vomit, a fool returneth to his folly."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Stage machinery used for theatrical effect.[Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *Coleridge*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *courtroom*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *legal entitlements*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in the end*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *communion*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *duty*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dramatic climax*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *disgrace*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *toy*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***From Book Eleventh.***

### ***Imagination, How Impaired and Restored***

#### **[SPOTS OF TIME]<sup>[1](#)</sup>**

\* \* \*

There are in our existence spots of time,  
Which with distinct preeminence retain  
A renovating virtue,<sup>[o](#)</sup> whence, depressed  
260 By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight  
In trivial occupations and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired—  
265 A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,  
That penetrates, enables us to mount  
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.  
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
Among those passages of life in which  
270 We have had deepest feeling that the mind  
Is lord and master, and that outward sense<sup>[2](#)</sup>  
Is but the obedient servant of her will.  
Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,  
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date  
275 From our first childhood—in our childhood even  
Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me,  
As far as memory can look back, is full  
Of this beneficent influence.

At a time

When scarcely (I was then not six years old)  
My hand could hold a bridle, with proud hopes  
280 I mounted, and we rode towards the hills:  
We were a pair of horsemen—honest James  
Was with me, my encourager and guide.<sup>3</sup>  
We had not travelled long ere some mischance  
Disjoined me from my comrade, and, through fear  
285 Dismounting, down the rough and stony moor  
I led my horse, and stumbling on, at length  
Came to a bottom<sup>o</sup> where in former times  
A murderer had been hung in iron chains.  
290 The gibbet-mast<sup>4</sup> was mouldered down, the bones  
And iron case were gone, but on the turf  
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,  
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's  
name.  
The monumental writing was engraven  
295 In times long past, and still from year to year  
By superstition of the neighbourhood  
The grass is cleared away; and to this hour  
The letters are all fresh and visible.  
Faltering, and ignorant where I was, at length  
300 I chanced to espy those characters<sup>o</sup> inscribed  
On the green sod: forthwith I left the spot,  
And, reascending the bare common, saw  
A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,  
The beacon on the summit,<sup>5</sup> and more near,  
305 A girl who bore a pitcher on her head  
And seemed with difficult steps to force her way  
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,  
An ordinary sight, but I should need  
Colours and words that are unknown to man  
To paint the visionary dreariness  
310 Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,  
Did at that time invest the naked pool,

The beacon on the lonely eminence,  
The woman, and her garments vexed and tossed  
By the strong wind. When, in blessed season,  
315 With those two dear ones<sup>6</sup>—to my heart so dear—  
When, in the blessed time of early love,  
Long afterwards I roamed about  
In daily presence of this very scene,  
Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,  
320 And on the melancholy beacon, fell  
The spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam—  
And think ye not with radiance more divine  
From these remembrances, and from the power  
They left behind? So feeling comes in aid  
325 Of feeling, and diversity of strength  
Attends us, if but once we have been strong.

Oh mystery of man, from what a depth  
Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see  
In simple childhood something of the base  
330 On which thy greatness stands—but this I feel,  
That from thyself it is that thou must give,  
Else never canst receive. The days gone by  
Come back upon me from the dawn almost  
Of life; the hiding-places of my power  
335 Seem open, I approach, and then they close;  
I see by glimpses now, when age comes on  
May scarcely see at all; and I would give  
While yet we may, as far as words can give,  
A substance and a life to what I feel:  
340 I would enshrine the spirit of the past  
For future restoration. Yet another  
Of these to me affecting incidents,  
With which we will conclude.

One Christmas-time,<sup>7</sup>  
The day before the holidays began,

345 Feverish, and tired, and restless, I went forth  
Into the fields, impatient for the sight  
Of those two horses which should bear us home,  
My brothers and myself. There was a crag,  
350 An eminence,<sup>o</sup> which from the meeting-point  
Of two highways ascending overlooked  
At least a long half-mile of those two roads,  
By each of which the expected steeds might come—  
The choice uncertain. Thither I repaired  
Up to the highest summit. 'Twas a day  
355 Stormy, and rough, and wild, and on the grass  
I sate half sheltered by a naked wall.  
Upon my right hand was a single sheep,  
A whistling hawthorn on my left, and there,  
With those companions at my side, I watched,  
360 Straining my eyes intensely as the mist  
Gave intermitting prospect of the wood  
And plain beneath. Ere I to school returned  
That dreary time, ere I had been ten days  
A dweller in my father's house, he died,  
365 And I and my two brothers, orphans then,  
Followed his body to the grave.<sup>8</sup> The event,  
With all the sorrow which it brought, appeared  
A chastisement; and when I called to mind  
That day so lately past, when from the crag  
370 I looked in such anxiety of hope,  
With trite reflections of morality,  
Yet in the deepest passion, I bowed low  
To God who thus corrected my desires.  
And afterwards the wind and sleety rain,  
375 And all the business<sup>9</sup> of the elements,  
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,  
And the bleak music of that old stone wall,  
The noise of wood and water, and the mist  
Which on the line of each of those two roads

380      Advanced in such indisputable shapes<sup>1</sup>—  
All these were spectacles and sounds to which  
I often would repair, and thence would drink  
As at a fountain. And I do not doubt  
385      That in this later time, when storm and rain  
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day  
When I am in the woods, unknown to me  
The workings of my spirit thence are brought.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Wordsworth's account in the lines that follow of two memories from childhood was originally drafted for the first book of the two-book *Prelude* of 1798. By transferring these early memories close to the end of his completed autobiography, rather than presenting them in its opening books alongside his other boyhood memories, he enacts his own theory about how remembrance of things past nourishes the imagination.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Perception of the external world.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The 1850 version of *The Prelude* refers to "an ancient Servant of my Father's house" (12.229).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The post with a projecting arm used for hanging criminals.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A signal beacon on a hill above Penrith.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: His future wife, Mary Hutchinson, and his sister, Dorothy.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In 1783, Wordsworth, aged thirteen, was at Hawkshead School with two of his brothers.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: John Wordsworth died on December 30, 1783. William's mother had died five years earlier.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Busy-ness, motions.[Return to reference 9](#)



- Note 1: That is, shapes one did not dare question. Compare this with Hamlet's declaration to the ghost of his father: "Thou com'st in such questionable shape / That I will speak to thee" (*Hamlet* 1.4.24–25). [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *power of renewal* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *valley* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *letters* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *elevated ground* [Return to reference °](#)

***From Book Thirteenth.***

***Conclusion***

## [VISION ON MOUNT SNOWDON]

In one of these excursions, travelling then  
Through Wales on foot and with a youthful friend,  
I left Bethkelet's huts at couching-time,  
And westward took my way to see the sun  
5 Rise from the top of Snowdon.<sup>1</sup> Having reached  
The cottage at the mountain's foot, we there  
Rouzed up the shepherd who by ancient right  
Of office is the stranger's usual guide,  
And after short refreshment sallied forth.

10 It was a summer's night, a close warm night,  
Wan, dull, and glaring,<sup>2</sup> with a dripping mist  
Low-hung and thick that covered all the sky,  
Half threatening storm and rain; but on we went  
Unchecked, being full of heart and having faith  
15 In our tried pilot. Little could we see,  
Hemmed round on every side with fog and damp,  
And, after ordinary travellers' chat  
With our conductor, silently we sunk  
Each into commerce with his private thoughts.  
Thus did we breast the ascent, and by myself  
20 Was nothing either seen or heard the while  
Which took me from my musings, save that once  
The shepherd's cur did to his own great joy  
Unearth a hedgehog in the mountain-crags,  
Round which he made a barking turbulent.  
25 This small adventure—for even such it seemed  
In that wild place and at the dead of night—  
Being over and forgotten, on we wound  
In silence as before. With forehead bent  
Earthward, as if in opposition set  
30 Against an enemy, I panted up

With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts,  
Thus might we wear perhaps an hour away,  
Ascending at loose distance each from each,  
And I, as chanced, the foremost of the band—  
35 When at my feet the ground appeared to brighten,  
And with a step or two seemed brighter still;  
Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,  
For instantly a light upon the turf  
Fell like a flash. I looked about, and lo,  
40 The moon stood naked in the heavens at height  
Immense above my head, and on the shore  
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,  
Which meek and silent rested at my feet.  
A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved  
45 All over this still ocean,<sup>3</sup> and beyond,  
Far, far beyond, the vapours shot themselves  
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,  
Into the sea, the real sea, that seemed  
To dwindle and give up its majesty,  
50 Usurped upon as far as sight could reach.  
Meanwhile, the moon looked down upon this shew  
In single glory, and we stood, the mist  
Touching our very feet; and from the shore  
At distance not the third part of a mile  
55 Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,  
A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which  
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams  
Innumerable, roaring with one voice.  
The universal spectacle throughout  
60 Was shaped for admiration and delight,  
Grand in itself alone, but in that breach  
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,  
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged  
The soul, the imagination of the whole.

65

A meditation rose in me that night

Upon the lonely mountain when the scene  
Had passed away, and it appeared to me  
The perfect image of a mighty mind,  
Of one that feeds upon infinity,  
70 That is exalted by an under-presence,  
The sense of God, or whatsoe'er is dim  
Or vast in its own being—above all,  
One function of such mind had Nature there  
Exhibited by putting forth, and that  
75 With circumstance most awful<sup>o</sup> and sublime:  
That domination which she oftentimes  
Exerts upon the outward face of things,  
So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines,  
Or by abrupt and unhabitual influence  
80 Doth make one object so impress itself  
Upon all others, and pervades them so,  
That even the grossest<sup>o</sup> minds must see and hear,  
And cannot chuse but feel. The power which these  
Acknowledge when thus moved, which Nature thus  
85 Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express  
Resemblance—in the fullness of its strength  
Made visible—a genuine counterpart  
And brother of the glorious faculty  
Which higher minds bear with them as their own.<sup>4</sup>  
90 This is the very spirit in which they deal  
With all the objects of the universe:  
They from their native selves can send abroad  
Like transformation, for themselves create  
A like existence, and, when'er it is  
95 Created for them, catch it by an instinct.  
Them the enduring and the transient both  
Serve to exalt. They build up greatest things  
From least suggestions, ever on the watch,  
Willing to work and to be wrought upon.  
100 They need not extraordinary calls

To rouse them—in a world of life they live,  
By sensible<sup>o</sup> impressions not enthralled,  
But quickened, roused, and made thereby more fit  
To hold communion with the invisible world.  
105 Such minds are truly from the Deity,  
For they are powers; and hence the highest bliss  
That can be known is theirs—the consciousness  
Of whom they are, habitually infused  
Through every image,<sup>5</sup> and through every thought,  
110 And all impressions; hence religion, faith,  
And endless occupation for the soul,  
Whether discursive or intuitive;<sup>6</sup>  
Hence sovereignty within and peace at will,  
Emotion which best foresight need not fear,  
115 Most worthy then of trust when most intense;  
Hence cheerfulness in every act of life;  
Hence truth in moral judgements; and delight  
That fails not, in the external universe.

Oh, who is he that hath his whole life long  
120 Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself?—  
For this alone is genuine liberty.  
Witness, ye solitudes, where I received  
My earliest visitations (careless then  
Of what was given me), and where now I roam,  
125 A meditative, oft a suffering man,  
And yet I trust with undiminished powers;  
Witness—whatever falls my better mind,  
Revolving with the accidents of life,  
May have sustained—that, howsoe'er misled,  
130 I never in the quest of right and wrong  
Did tamper with myself<sup>o</sup> from private aims;  
Nor was in any of my hopes the dupe  
Of selfish passions; nor did wilfully  
Yield ever to mean cares and low pursuits;

135 But rather did with jealousy<sup>o</sup> shrink back  
From every combination that might aid  
The tendency, too potent in itself,  
Of habit to enslave the mind—I mean  
140 Oppress it by the laws of vulgar<sup>o</sup> sense,  
And substitute a universe of death,  
The falsest of all worlds, in place of that  
Which is divine and true.<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Wordsworth climbed Mount Snowdon—the highest peak in Wales, some ten miles from the sea—with Robert Jones, the friend with whom he had also hiked through the Alps (book 6). The climb started from the village of Beddgelert (“Bethkelet”) at “couching-time” (line 3), the time of night when the sheep lie down to sleep. This event took place in 1791 or possibly 1793; Wordsworth presents it out of its chronological order so as to introduce at this point the “perfect image” (line 69) for the mind, and especially for the activity of the imagination, whose “restoration” the previous books have described.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In the dialect of northern England, *glairie*, applied to the weather, means dull or rainy.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In Milton’s description of God’s creation of land from the waters, “the mountains huge appear / Emergent, and their broad bare backs upheave / Into the clouds” (*Paradise Lost* 7.285–87).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The “glorious faculty” is the imagination, which transfigures and re-creates what is given to it, much as, in Wordsworth’s account of the night on Snowdon, the moonlit mist, layering a metaphoric sea atop a “real sea,” transfigures the familiar landscape.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: That is, through all they see.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An echo of Archangel Raphael's account to Adam of the soul's powers of reason (*Paradise Lost* 5.488–89). Discursive reason, mainly a human quality according to Raphael, undertakes to reach truths through a logical sequence of premises, observations, and conclusions; "intuitive" reason, mainly angelic, comprehends truth immediately.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In *Paradise Lost* 2.622, the phrase "universe of death" is used to describe Hell. Wordsworth's Hell is a place in which individuals are enslaved by an unimaginative reliance on the senses and habitual perceptions.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *awe-inspiring*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dullest*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sensory*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *my conscience*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *vigilance*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *commonplace*[Return to reference °](#)



## [FINAL PROPHECY]

Oh, yet a few short years of useful life,  
And all will be complete—thy race be run,  
Thy monument of glory will be raised.<sup>8</sup>  
430 Then, though too weak to tread the ways of truth,  
This age fall back to old idolatry,  
Though men return to servitude as fast  
As the tide ebbs, to ignominy and shame  
By nations sink together,<sup>9</sup> we shall still  
435 Find solace in the knowledge which we have,  
Blessed with true happiness if we may be  
United helpers forward of a day  
Of firmer trust, joint labourers in the work—  
Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe<sup>o</sup>—  
440 Of their<sup>o</sup> redemption, surely yet to come.  
Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak  
A lasting inspiration, sanctified  
By reason and by truth; what we have loved  
Others will love, and we may teach them how:  
445 Instruct them how the mind of man becomes  
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
On which he dwells, above this frame of things  
(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes  
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)  
450 In beauty exalted, as it is itself  
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

1805

## Endnotes

1926

- Note 8: In his conclusion, Wordsworth once again addresses Coleridge. [Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: That is, though men—whole nations of them together—sink to ignominy (disgrace) and shame.[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *grant*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *men's*[Return to reference °](#)

# **DOROTHY WORDSWORTH**

## **1771–1855**

Dorothy Wordsworth has an enduring place in English literature even though she wrote very little for publication. Not until late in the nineteenth century did editors begin systematically to collect and print her writings: letters, a few poems, memoirs of her travels, and a set of journals that are now known by the names of the places where she wrote them, the Alfoxden journal (1798), the Grasmere journal (1800–1803), and the Rydal journal (1824–35). It has always been known, from tributes to her by her brother and Coleridge, that she exerted an important influence on the lives and writings of both these men. It is now apparent that she also possessed a power surpassing that of the two poets for precise observation of people and the natural world, together with a genius for terse, luminous, and delicately nuanced description in prose.

Dorothy was born on Christmas Day 1771, twenty-one months after William; she was the only girl of five Wordsworth children. From her seventh year, when her mother died, she lived with various relatives and saw William and her other brothers only occasionally, during the boys' summer vacations from school. In 1795, when she was twenty-four, an inheritance that William received enabled her to carry out a long-held plan to join her brother in a house at Racedown, and the two spent the rest of their long lives together, first in Dorsetshire and Somersetshire, in the southwest of England, then in their beloved Lake District. She uncomplainingly

subordinated her own talents to looking after her brother and his household. She also became William's secretary, tirelessly copying and recopying the manuscripts of his poems to ready them for publication. Despite the scolding of a great-aunt, who deemed "rambling about . . . on foot" unladylike, she accompanied her brother, too, in vigorous cross-country walks in which they sometimes covered as much as thirty-three miles in a day. In late summer and early autumn 1803, in an adventure she memorialized in her manuscript travelogue *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, she and William, joined part of the time by Coleridge, took a grueling, six-week, 663-mile journey through the Scottish Lowlands and Highlands, often proceeding on foot because the roads were too rough for their horse-drawn carriage.

In 1829, the first in a series of severe bouts of illness, never precisely diagnosed and affecting both her body and her mind, began a new phase in Dorothy's existence. Walking became increasingly difficult for her. By the close of the 1830s, she was confined year-round to her bedroom upstairs in her brother and sister-in-law's house, her horizon, as her editor Pamela Woof puts it, narrowed to "the pots of flowers on her window ledge." She lingered in this half-life until 1855, attended devotedly by William until his death five years before her own.

Our principal selections are from the journal Dorothy kept in 1798 at Alfoxden, Somersetshire, where the Wordsworths had moved from Racedown to be near Coleridge at Nether Stowey, as well as from her journals while at Grasmere (1800–03), with Coleridge residing some thirteen miles away at Greta Hall, Keswick. Her records cover the period when both men emerged as major poets, and in their achievements Dorothy played an indispensable role. In book 10 of the 1805 *Prelude*, William says that in the time of his spiritual crisis, Dorothy "maintained for me a saving intercourse / With my true self" and "preserved me still / A Poet"; in a letter of 1797, Coleridge stressed the delicacy and tact in the responses of William's "exquisite sister" to the world of sense: "Her manners are simple, ardent, impressive. . . . Her information various—her eye

watchful in minutest observation of nature—and her taste a perfect electrometer—it bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties & most recondite faults.”

The verbal sketches of natural scenes given in the journal passages reprinted here are often echoed in Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poems. Of at least equal importance for Wordsworth was her chronicling of the busy wayfaring life of rural England. These were exceedingly hard times for country people, when the suffering caused by the displacement of small farms and of household crafts by large-scale farms and industries was aggravated by the economic distress caused by protracted Continental wars (see Wordsworth’s comment in *The Ruined Cottage*, lines 133ff., [p. 357](#), above). Peddlers, maimed war veterans, leech gatherers, adult and infant beggars, ousted farm families, fugitives, and women abandoned by husbands or lovers streamed along the rural roads and into William’s brooding poetic imagination—often by way of Dorothy’s prose records.

The journals also show the intensity of Dorothy’s love for her brother. Inevitably in our era, the mutual devotion of the orphaned brother and sister has evoked psychoanalytic speculation. It is important to note that Mary Hutchinson, a gentle and openhearted young woman, had been Dorothy’s closest friend since adolescence, and that Dorothy encouraged William’s courtship and marriage, even though she realized that it entailed her own displacement as a focus of her brother’s life. All the evidence indicates that their lives in a single household never strained the affectionate relationship between the two women; indeed Dorothy, until she became an invalid, added to her former functions as William’s chief support, housekeeper, and scribe a loving ministration to her brother’s children.

In 1897 William Wordsworth’s biographer William Knight published the first transcripts of Dorothy Wordsworth’s Alfoxden and Grasmere journals, and those transcripts are the basis for the excerpts printed here. The exception is the entry from autumn 1802, in which Dorothy describes her distress on her brother’s wedding

day: because Knight excluded it from his edition, we rely there on Pamela Woof's edition of the Grasmere journals (Oxford University Press, 1991). Dorothy Wordsworth's poems, many of them originally written for the children in her brother's household, survived through the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries mainly as manuscripts in various family commonplace books. (William Wordsworth did, however, include three in his *Poems* of 1815, ascribing them to a "Female Friend.") Her poems were not collected until 1987, when Susan M. Levin edited thirty of them in an appendix ("The Collected Poems of Dorothy Wordsworth") to her *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*. The poems "Grasmere—A Fragment" and "Thoughts on My Sick-Bed" are reprinted from that source.

## ***From The Alfoxden Journal***

Jan. 31, 1798. Set forward to Stowey<sup>1</sup> at half-past five. A violent storm in the wood; sheltered under the hollies. When we left home the moon immensely large, the sky scattered over with clouds. These soon closed in, contracting the dimensions of the moon without concealing her.<sup>2</sup> The sound of the pattering shower, and the gusts of wind, very grand. Left the wood when nothing remained of the storm but the driving wind, and a few scattering drops of rain. Presently all clear, Venus first showing herself between the struggling clouds; afterwards Jupiter appeared. The hawthorn hedges, black and pointed, glittering with millions of diamond drops; the hollies shining with broader patches of light. The road to the village of Holford glittered like another stream. On our return, the wind high—a violent storm of hail and rain at the Castle of Comfort.<sup>3</sup> All the Heavens seemed in one perpetual motion when the rain ceased; the moon appearing, now half veiled, and now retired behind heavy clouds, the stars still moving, the roads very dirty.

\* \* \*

Feb. 3. A mild morning, the windows open at breakfast, the redbreasts singing in the garden. Walked with Coleridge over the hills. The sea at first obscured by vapour; that vapour afterwards slid in one mighty mass along the sea-shore; the islands and one point of land clear beyond it. The distant country (which was purple in the clear dull air), overhung by straggling clouds that sailed over it, appeared like the darker clouds, which are often seen at a great distance apparently motionless, while the nearer ones pass quickly over them, driven by the lower winds. I never saw such a union of earth, sky, and sea. The clouds beneath our feet spread themselves to the water, and the clouds of the sky almost joined them. Gathered

sticks in the wood; a perfect stillness. The redbreasts sang upon the leafless boughs. Of a great number of sheep in the field, only one standing. Returned to dinner at five o'clock. The moonlight still and warm as a summer's night at nine o'clock.

Feb. 4. Walked a great part of the way to Stowey with Coleridge. The morning warm and sunny. The young lasses seen on the hill-tops, in the villages and roads, in their summer holiday clothes—pink petticoats and blue. Mothers with their children in arms, and the little ones that could just walk, tottering by their side. Midges or small flies spinning in the sunshine; the songs of the lark and redbreast; daisies upon the turf; the hazels in blossom; honeysuckles budding. I saw one solitary strawberry flower under a hedge. The furze<sup>4</sup> gay with blossom. The moss rubbed from the pailings by the sheep, that leave locks of wool, and the red marks with which they are spotted, upon the wood.<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

Feb. 8. Went up the Park, and over the tops of the hills, till we came to a new and very delicious pathway, which conducted us to the Coombe.<sup>6</sup> Sat a considerable time upon the heath. Its surface restless and glittering with the motion of the scattered piles of withered grass, and the waving of the spiders' threads.<sup>7</sup> On our return the mist still hanging over the sea, but the opposite coast clear, and the rocky cliffs distinguishable. In the deep Coombe, as we stood upon the sunless hill, we saw miles of grass, light and glittering, and the insects passing.

Feb. 9. William gathered sticks.

Feb. 10. Walked to Woodlands, and to the waterfall. The adder's-tongue and the ferns green in the low damp dell. These plants now in perpetual motion from the current of the air; in summer only moved by the drippings of the rocks. A cloudy day.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*



Mar. 7. William and I drank tea at Coleridge's. A cloudy sky. Observed nothing particularly interesting—the distant prospect obscured. One only leaf upon the top of a tree—the sole remaining leaf—danced round and round like a rag blown by the wind.<sup>9</sup>

Mar. 8. Walked in the Park in the morning. I sate under the fir trees. Coleridge came after dinner, so we did not walk again. A foggy morning, but a clear sunny day.

Mar. 9. A clear sunny morning, went to meet Mr. and Mrs. Coleridge. The day very warm.

Mar. 10. Coleridge, Wm., and I walked in the evening to the top of the hill. We all passed the morning in sauntering about the park and gardens, the children playing about, the old man at the top of the hill gathering furze; interesting groups of human creatures, the young frisking and dancing in the sun, the elder quietly drinking in the life and soul of the sun and air.

Mar. 11. A cold day. The children went down towards the sea. William and I walked to the top of the hills above Holford. Met the blacksmith. Pleasant to see the labourer on Sunday jump with the friskiness of a cow upon a sunny day.

\* \* \*

## 1798**Endnotes**

1897

- Note 1: That is, to Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey, three miles from Alfoxden.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Compare Coleridge's *Christabel*, lines 16–19 (p. 495, below).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A tavern halfway between Holford and Nether Stowey[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Evergreen shrub with yellow flowers, sometimes called gorse.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Compare Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*, lines 330–36 (p. 361, above).[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: Hodder's Coombe is in the Quantock Hills, near Alfoxden. A coombe is a deep valley.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Compare Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, line 184 (p. 480, below).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Compare the description of the dell in Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," lines 13–20 (p. 473, below).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Compare *Christabel*, lines 49ff. (p. 496, below).[Return to reference 9](#)

# ***From The Grasmere Journals***

**1800**

*May 14, 1800.*—Wm. and John set off into Yorkshire<sup>1</sup> after dinner at half-past two o'clock, cold pork in their pockets. I left them at the turning of the Lowwood bay under the trees. My heart was so full that I could hardly speak to W. when I gave him a farewell kiss. I sate a long time upon a stone at the margin of the lake, and after a flood of tears my heart was easier. The lake looked to me, I knew not why, dull and melancholy, and the weltering on the shores seemed a heavy sound. I walked as long as I could amongst the stones of the shore. The wood rich in flowers; a beautiful yellow (palish yellow) flower, that looked thick, round, and double—the smell very sweet (I supposed it was a ranunculus), crowfoot, the grassy-leaved rabbit-looking white flower, strawberries, geraniums, scentless violets, anemones, two kinds of orchises, primroses, the hackberry very beautiful, the crab coming out as a low shrub. Met an old man, driving a very large beautiful bull, and a cow. He walked with two sticks. Came home by Clappersgate. The valley very green; many sweet views up to Rydale, when I could juggle away the fine houses; but they disturbed me, even more than when I have been happier; one beautiful view of the bridge, without Sir Michael's.<sup>2</sup> Sate down very often, though it was cold. I resolved to write a journal of the time, till W. and J. return, and I set about keeping my resolve, because I will not quarrel with myself, and because I shall give William pleasure by it when he comes home again. At Rydale, a woman of the village, stout and well dressed, begged a half-penny. She had never she said done it before, but these hard times! Arrived at home, set some slips of privet, the evening cold, had a fire, my face now flame-coloured. It is nine o'clock. I shall now go to bed.

\* \* \*

*Friday, 3rd October.* Very rainy all the morning. Wm. walked to Ambleside after dinner. I went with him part of the way. He talked much about the object of his essay for the second volume of "L. B."<sup>3</sup> \* \* \*

*N.B.*—When William and I returned from accompanying Jones, we met an old man almost double.<sup>4</sup> He had on a coat, thrown over his shoulders, above his waistcoat and coat. Under this he carried a bundle, and had an apron on and a night-cap. His face was interesting. He had dark eyes and a long nose. John, who afterwards met him at Wytheburn, took him for a Jew. He was of Scotch parents, but had been born in the army. He had had a wife, and "she was a good woman, and it pleased God to bless us with ten children." All these were dead but one, of whom he had not heard for many years, a sailor. His trade was to gather leeches, but now leeches were scarce, and he had not strength for it. He lived by begging, and was making his way to Carlisle, where he should buy a few godly books to sell. He said leeches were very scarce, partly owing to this dry season, but many years they have been scarce. He supposed it owing to their being much sought after, that they did not breed fast, and were of slow growth. Leeches were formerly 2s. 6d.<sup>5</sup> per 100; they are now 30s. He had been hurt in driving a cart, his leg broken, his body driven over, his skull fractured. He felt no pain till he recovered from his first insensibility. It was then late in the evening, when the light was just going away.

\* \* \*

*Saturday, [Oct.] 11th.* A fine October morning. Sat in the house working all the morning. William composing. \* \* \* After dinner we walked up Greenhead Gill in search of a sheepfold.<sup>6</sup> We went by Mr. Olliff's, and through his woods. It was a delightful day, and the views looked excessively cheerful and beautiful, chiefly that from Mr. Olliff's field, where our own house is to be built. The colours of the

mountains soft, and rich with orange fern; the cattle pasturing upon the hilltops; kites sailing in the sky above our heads; sheep bleating, and feeding in the water courses, scattered over the mountains. They come down and feed, on the little green islands in the beds of the torrents, and so may be swept away. The sheepfold is falling away. It is built nearly in the form of a heart unequally divided. Looked down the brook, and saw the drops rise upwards and sparkle in the air at the little falls. The higher sparkled the tallest. We walked along the turf of the mountain till we came to a track, made by the cattle which come upon the hills.

\* \* \*

*Sunday, October 12th.* Sate in the house writing in the morning while Wm. went into the wood to compose. Wrote to John in the morning; copied poems for the L. B. In the evening wrote to Mrs. Rawson. Mary Jameson and Sally Ashburner dined. We pulled apples after dinner, a large basket full. We walked before tea by Bainriggs to observe the many-coloured foliage. The oaks dark green with yellow leaves, the birches generally still green, some near the water yellowish, the sycamore crimson and crimson-tufted, the mountain ash a deep orange, the common ash lemon-colour, but many ashes still fresh in their peculiar green, those that were discoloured chiefly near the water. Wm. composing in the evening. Went to bed at 12 o'clock.

## 1801

*Tuesday, [Nov.] 24th.* \* \* \* It was very windy, and we heard the wind everywhere about us as we went along the lane, but the walls sheltered us. John Green's house looked pretty under Silver How. As we were going along we were stopped at once, at the distance perhaps of 50 yards from our favourite birch tree. It was yielding to the gusty wind with all its tender twigs. The sun shone upon it, and it glanced in the wind like a flying sunshiny shower. It was a tree in shape, with stem and branches, but it was like a spirit of water. The

sun went in, and it resumed its purplish appearance, the twigs still yielding to the wind, but not so visibly to us. The other birch trees that were near it looked bright and cheerful, but it was a creature by its own self among them. . . . We went through the wood. It became fair. There was a rainbow which spanned the lake from the island-house to the foot of Bainriggs. The village looked populous and beautiful. Catkins are coming out; palm trees budding; the alder, with its plum-coloured buds. We came home over the stepping-stones. The lake was foamy with white waves. I saw a solitary butter-flower in the wood. \* \* \* Reached home at dinner time. Sent Peggy Ashburner some goose. She sent me some honey, with a thousand thanks. "Alas! the gratitude of men has," etc.<sup>7</sup> I went in to set her right about this, and sate a while with her. She talked about Thomas's having sold his land. "I," says she, "said many a time he's not come fra London to buy our land, however." Then she told me with what pains and industry they had made up their taxes, interest, etc. etc., how they all got up at 5 o'clock in the morning to spin and Thomas carded, and that they had paid off a hundred pounds of the interest. She said she used to take much pleasure in the cattle and sheep. "O how pleased I used to be when they fetched them down, and when I had been a bit poorly I would gang out upon a hill and look over 't fields and see them, and it used to do me so much good you cannot think." Molly said to me when I came in, "Poor body! she's very ill, but one does not know how long she may last. Many a fair face may gang before her." We sate by the fire without work for some time, then Mary read a poem of Daniel.<sup>8</sup> \* \* \* \* \* Wm. read Spenser, now and then, a little aloud to us. We were making his waistcoat. We had a note from Mrs. C., with bad news from poor C.—very ill. William went to John's Grove. I went to find him. Moonlight, but it rained. \* \* \* \* \* He had been surprised, and terrified, by a sudden rushing of winds, which seemed to bring earth, sky, and lake together, as if the whole were going to enclose him in. He was glad he was in a high road.

In speaking of our walk on Sunday evening, the 22nd November, I forgot to notice one most impressive sight. It was the moon and

the moonlight seen through hurrying driving clouds immediately behind the Stone-Man upon the top of the hill, on the forest side. Every tooth and every edge of rock was visible, and the Man stood like a giant watching from the roof of a lofty castle. The hill seemed perpendicular from the darkness below it. It was a sight that I could call to mind at any time, it was so distinct.

## 1802

*Thursday [Mar. 4].* Before we had quite finished breakfast Calvert's man brought the horses for Wm.<sup>9</sup> We had a deal to do, pens to make, poems to put in order for writing, to settle for the press, pack up; and the man came before the pens were made, and he was obliged to leave me with only two. Since he left me at half-past 11 (it is now 2) I have been putting the drawers into order, laid by his clothes which he had thrown here and there and everywhere, filed two months' newspapers and got my dinner, 2 boiled eggs and 2 apple tarts. I have set Molly on to clean the garden a little, and I myself have walked. I transplanted some snowdrops—the Bees are busy. Wm. has a nice bright day. It was hard frost in the night. The Robins are singing sweetly. Now for my walk. I *will* be busy. I *will* look well, and be well when he comes back to me. O the Darling! Here is one of his bitten apples. I can hardly find it in my heart to throw it into the fire. \* \* \* I walked round the two Lakes, crossed the stepping-stones at Rydale foot. Sate down where we always sit. I was full of thought about my darling. Blessings on him. I came home at the foot of our own hill under Loughrigg. They are making sad ravages in the woods. Benson's wood is going, and the woods above the River. The wind has blown down a small fir tree on the Rock, that terminates John's path. I suppose the wind of Wednesday night. I read German after tea. I worked and read the L. B., enchanted with the *Idiot Boy*. Wrote to Wm. and then went to bed. It snowed when I went to bed.

\* \* \*

*Monday [Mar. 22].* A rainy day. William very poorly. 2 letters from Sara, and one from poor Annette. Wrote to my brother Richard. We talked a good deal about C. and other interesting things. We resolved to see Annette, and that Wm. should go to Mary.<sup>1</sup> Wm. wrote to Coleridge not to expect us till Thursday or Friday.

*Tuesday.*—A mild morning. William worked at *The Cuckoo* poem.<sup>2</sup> I sewed beside him. After dinner he slept. I read German, and, at the closing-in of day, went to sit in the orchard. William came to me, and walked backwards and forwards. We talked about C. Wm. repeated the poem to me. I left him there, and in 20 minutes he came in, rather tired with attempting to write. He is now reading Ben Jonson. I am going to read German. It is about 10 o'clock, a quiet night. The fire flickers, and the watch ticks. I hear nothing save the breathing of my Beloved as he now and then pushes his book forward, and turns over a leaf. \* \* \*

\* \* \*

*Thursday, [Apr.] 15th.* It was a threatening, misty morning, but mild. We set off after dinner from Eusemere. Mrs. Clarkson went a short way with us, but turned back.<sup>3</sup> The wind was furious, and we thought we must have returned. We first rested in the large boathouse, then under a furze bush opposite Mr. Clarkson's. Saw the plough going in the field. The wind seized our breath. The lake was rough. There was a boat by itself floating in the middle of the bay below Water Millock. We rested again in the Water Millock Lane. The hawthorns are black and green, the birches here and there greenish, but there is yet more of purple to be seen on the twigs. We got over into a field to avoid some cows—people working. A few primroses by the roadside—woodsorrel flower, the anemone, scentless violets, strawberries, and that starry, yellow flower which Mrs. C. calls pile wort. When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side.<sup>4</sup> We fancied that the sea had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last,



under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and above them; some rested their heads upon these stones, as on a pillow, for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot, and a few stragglers higher up; but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity, unity, and life of that one busy highway. We rested again and again. The bays were stormy, and we heard the waves at different distances, and in the middle of the water, like the sea. Rain came on. \* \* \* William was sitting by a good fire when I came downstairs. He soon made his way to the library, piled up in a corner of the window. He brought out a volume of Enfield's *Speaker*,<sup>5</sup> another miscellany, and an odd volume of Congreve's plays. We had a glass of warm rum and water. We enjoyed ourselves, and wished for Mary. It rained and blew, when we went to bed. \* \* \*

*Friday, 16th April (Good Friday).*—When I undrew curtains in the morning, I was much affected by the beauty of the prospect, and the change. The sun shone, the wind had passed away, the hills looked cheerful, the river was very bright as it flowed into the lake. The church rises up behind a little knot of rocks, the steeple not so high as an ordinary three-story house. Trees in a row in the garden under the wall. The valley is at first broken by little woody knolls that make retiring places, fairy valleys in the vale, the river winds along under these hills, travelling, not in a bustle but not slowly, to the lake. We saw a fisherman in the flat meadow on the other side of the water. He came towards us, and threw his line over the two-arched bridge. It is a bridge of a heavy construction, almost bending inwards in the middle, but it is grey, and there is a look of ancientry in the architecture of it that pleased me. As we go on the vale opens out more into one vale, with somewhat of a cradle bed. Cottages, with groups of trees, on the side of the hills. We passed a pair of

twin children, two years old. Sate on the next bridge which we crossed—a single arch. We rested again upon the turf, and looked at the same bridge. We observed arches in the water, occasioned by the large stones sending it down in two streams. A sheep came plunging through the river, stumbled up the bank, and passed close to us. It had been frightened by an insignificant little dog on the other side. Its fleece dropped a glittering shower under its belly. Primroses by the road-side, pile wort that shone like stars of gold in the sun, violets, strawberries, retired and half-buried among the grass. When we came to the foot of Brothers Water, I left William sitting on the bridge, and went along the path on the right side of the lake through the wood. I was delighted with what I saw. The water under the boughs of the bare old trees, the simplicity of the mountains, and the exquisite beauty of the path. There was one grey cottage. I repeated *The Glow-worm*,<sup>6</sup> as I walked along. I hung over the gate, and thought I could have stayed for ever. When I returned, I found William writing a poem descriptive of the sights and sounds we saw and heard. There was the gentle flowing of the stream, the glittering, lively lake, green fields without a living creature to be seen on them; behind us, a flat pasture with forty-two cattle feeding; to our left, the road leading to the hamlet. No smoke there, the sun shone on the bare roofs. The people were at work ploughing, harrowing, and sowing; . . . a dog barking now and then, cocks crowing, birds twittering, the snow in patches at the top of the highest hills, yellow palms, purple and green twigs on the birches, ashes with their glittering stems quite bare. The hawthorn a bright green, with black stems under the oak. The moss of the oak glossy. We went on. Passed two sisters at work (they first passed us), one with two pitchforks in her hand, the other had a spade. We had come to talk with them. They laughed long after we were gone, perhaps half in wantonness, half boldness. William finished his poem.<sup>7</sup> Before we got to the foot of Kirkstone, there were hundreds of cattle in the vale. \* \* \*

*Thursday, [Apr.] 29th.* \* \* \* After I had written down *The Tinker*, which William finished this morning,<sup>8</sup> Luff called. He was very lame,

limped into the kitchen. He came on a little pony. We then went to John's Grove, sate a while at first; afterwards William lay, and I lay, in the trench under the fence—he with his eyes shut, and listening to the waterfalls and the birds. There was no one waterfall above another—it was a sound of waters in the air—the voice of the air. William heard me breathing, and rustling now and then, but we both lay still, and unseen by one another. He thought that it would be so sweet thus to lie in the grave, to hear the peaceful sounds of the earth, and just to know that our dear friends were near. The lake was still; there was a boat out. Silver How reflected with delicate purple and yellowish hues, as I have seen spar; lambs on the island, and running races together by the half-dozen, in the round field near us. The copses greenish, hawthorns green, . . . cottages smoking. As I lay down on the grass, I observed the glittering silver line on the ridge of the backs of the sheep, owing to their situation respecting the sun, which made them look beautiful, but with something of strangeness, like animals of another kind, as if belonging to a more splendid world. \* \* \*

\* \* \*

*Tuesday, May 4th.* Though William went to bed nervous, and jaded in the extreme, he rose refreshed, wrote out *The Leech Gatherer*<sup>9</sup> for him, which he had begun the night before and of which he wrote several stanzas in bed this Monday morning. It was very hot. \* \* \* We rested several times by the way,—read, and repeated *The Leech Gatherer*. \* \* \* We saw Coleridge on the Wytheburn side of the water; he crossed the beck to us. Mr. Simpson was fishing there. William and I ate luncheon and then went on towards the waterfall. It is a glorious wild solitude under that lofty purple crag. It stood upright by itself; its own self, and its shadow below, one mass; all else was sunshine. We went on further. A bird at the top of the crag was flying round and round, and looked in thinness and transparency, shape and motion like a moth. We climbed the hill, but looked in vain for a shade, except at the foot of

the great waterfall. We came down, and rested upon a moss-covered rock rising out of the bed of the river. There we lay, ate our dinner, and stayed there till about four o'clock or later. William and Coleridge repeated and read verses. I drank a little brandy and water, and was in heaven. The stag's horn is very beautiful and fresh, springing upon the fells; mountain ashes, green. We drank tea at a farm house. \* \* \* We parted from Coleridge at Sara's crag, after having looked for the letters which C. carved in the morning. I missed them all. William deepened the T. with C.'s pen-knive.<sup>1</sup> We sate afterwards on the wall, seeing the sun go down, and the reflections in the still water. C. looked well, and parted from us cheerfully, hopping upon the side stones. On the Raise we met a woman with two little girls, one in her arms, the other, about four years old, walking by her side, a pretty little thing, but half-starved. \* \* \* The mother, when we accosted her, told us how her husband had left her, and gone off with another woman, and how she "*pursued*" them. Then her fury kindled, and her eyes rolled about. She changed again to tears. She was a Cockermouth woman, thirty years of age—a child at Cockermouth when I was. I was moved, and gave her a shilling. . . . We had the crescent moon with the "auld moon in her arms."<sup>2</sup> We rested often, always upon the bridges. Reached home at about ten o'clock. \* \* \* We went soon to bed. I repeated verses to William while he was in bed; he was soothed, and I left him. "This is the spot"<sup>3</sup> over and over again.

\* \* \*

*Thursday, 6th May.*—A sweet morning. We have put the finishing stroke to our bower, and here we are sitting in the orchard. It is one o'clock. We are sitting upon a seat under the wall, which I found my brother building up, when I came to him.—He had intended that it should have been done before I came. It is a nice, cool, shady spot. The small birds are singing, lambs bleating, cuckoos calling, the thrush sings by fits, Thomas Ashburner's axe is going quietly (without passion) in the orchard, hens are cackling, flies humming,

the women talking together at their doors, plum and pear trees are in blossom—apple trees greenish—the opposite woods green, the crows are cawing, we have heard ravens, the ash trees are in blossom, birds flying all about us, the stitchwort is coming out, there is one budding lychnis, the primroses are passing their prime, celandine, violets, and wood sorrel for ever more, little geraniums and pansies on the wall. We walked in the evening to Tail End, to inquire about hurdles for the orchard shed. \* \* \* When we came in we found a magazine, and review, and a letter from Coleridge, verses to Hartley, and Sara H. We read the review,<sup>4</sup> etc. The moon was a perfect boat, a silver boat, when we were out in the evening. The birch tree is all over green in *small* leaf, more light and elegant than when it is full out. It bent to the breezes, as if for the love of its own delightful motions. Sloe-thorns and hawthorns in the hedges.

*Friday, 7th May.*—William had slept uncommonly well, so, feeling himself strong, he fell to work at *The Leech Gatherer*; he wrote hard at it till dinner time, then he gave over, tired to death—he had finished the poem.<sup>5</sup> I was making Derwent's frocks. After dinner we sate in the orchard. It was a thick, hazy, dull air. The thrush sang almost continually; the little birds were more than usually busy with their voices. The sparrows are now full fledged. The nest is so full that they lie upon one another; they sit quietly in their nest with closed mouths. I walked to Rydale after tea, which we drank by the kitchen fire. The evening very dull; a terrible kind of threatening brightness at sunset above Easedale. The sloe-thorn beautiful in the hedges, and in the wild spots higher up among the hawthorns. No letters. William met me. He had been digging in my absence, and cleaning the well. We walked up beyond Lewthwaites. A very dull sky; coolish; crescent moon now and then. I had a letter brought me from Mrs. Clarkson while we were walking in the orchard. I observed the sorrel leaves opening at about nine o'clock. William went to bed tired with thinking about a poem.

\* \* \*

[*July.*] On Thursday morning, 29th, we arrived in London.<sup>6</sup> Wm. left me at the Sun. \* \* \* After various troubles and disasters, we left London on Saturday morning at half-past five or six, the 31st of July. We mounted the Dover coach at Charing Cross. It was a beautiful morning. The city, St. Paul's, with the river, and a multitude of little boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke, and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a fierce light, that there was even something like the purity of one of nature's own grand spectacles.<sup>7</sup>

We rode on cheerfully, now with the Paris diligence before us, now behind. We walked up the steep hills, a beautiful prospect everywhere, till we even reached Dover. \* \* \* We arrived at Calais at four o'clock on Sunday morning, the 31st of July.<sup>8</sup> We stayed in the vessel till half-past seven; then William went for letters at about half-past eight or nine. We found out Annette and C. chez Madame Avril dans la Rue de la Tête d'or. We lodged opposite two ladies, in tolerably decent-sized rooms, but badly furnished. \* \* \* The weather was very hot. We walked by the sea-shore almost every evening with Annette and Caroline, or William and I alone. I had a bad cold, and could not bathe at first, but William did. It was a pretty sight to see as we walked upon the sands when the tide was low, perhaps a hundred people bathing about a quarter of a mile distant from us. And we had delightful walks after the heat of the day was passed—seeing far off in the west the coast of England like a cloud crested with Dover castle, which was but like the summit of the cloud—the evening star and the glory of the sky, the reflections in the water were more beautiful than the sky itself, purple waves brighter than precious stones, for ever melting away upon the sands.

\* \* \*

[*Sept. 24 and following.*] Mary first met us in the avenue. She looked so fat and well that we were made very happy by the sight of her—then came Sara, & last of all Joanna.<sup>9</sup> Tom was forking corn



standing upon the corn cart. We dressed ourselves immediately & got tea—the garden looked gay with asters & sweet peas—I looked at everything with tranquillity & happiness but I was ill both on Saturday & Sunday & continued to be poorly most of the time of our stay. Jack & George came on Friday Evening 1st October. On Saturday 2nd we rode to Hackness, William Jack George & Sara single, I behind Tom. On Sunday 3rd Mary & Sara were busy packing. On Monday 4th October 1802, my Brother William was married to Mary Hutchinson. I slept a good deal of the night & rose fresh & well in the morning—at a little after 8 o'clock I saw them go down the avenue towards the Church. William had parted from me up stairs. I gave him the wedding ring—with how deep a blessing! I took it from my forefinger where I had worn it the whole of the night before—he slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently. When they were absent my dear little Sara prepared the breakfast. I kept myself as quiet as I could, but when I saw the two men running up the walk, coming to tell us it was over, I could stand it no longer & threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing or seeing any thing, till Sara came upstairs to me & said “They are coming.” This forced me from the bed where I lay & I moved I knew not how straight forward, faster than my strength could carry me till I met my beloved William & fell upon his bosom. He & John Hutchinson led me to the house & there I stayed to welcome my dear Mary. As soon as we had breakfasted we departed.<sup>1</sup> It rained when we set off. Poor Mary was much agitated when she parted from her Brothers & Sisters & her home. Nothing particular occurred till we reached Kirby. We had sunshine & showers, pleasant talk, love & cheerfulness. \* \* \* It rained very hard when we reached Windermere. We sate in the rain at Wilcock's to change horses, & arrived at Grasmere at about 6 o'clock on Wednesday Evening, the 6th of October 1802. Molly was overjoyed to see us,—for my part I cannot describe what I felt, & our dear Mary's feelings would I dare say not be easy to speak of. We went by candle light into the garden & were astonished at the growth of the Brooms, Portugal Laurels, &c &c—The next day, Thursday, we unpacked the Boxes. On Friday

8th we baked Bread, & Mary & I walked, first upon the Hill side, & then in John's Grove, then in view of Rydale, the first walk that I had taken with my Sister.

\* \* \*

*24th December.*—Christmas Eve. William is now sitting by me, at half-past ten o'clock. I have been \* \* \* repeating some of his sonnets to him, listening to his own repeating, reading some of Milton's, and the *Allegro* and *Penseroso*. It is a quick, keen frost. \* \* \* Coleridge came this morning with Wedgwood. We all turned out \* \* \* one by one, to meet him. He looked well. We had to tell him of the birth of his little girl, born yesterday morning at six o'clock. William went with them to Wytheburn in the chaise, and M. and I met W. on the Raise. It was not an unpleasant morning. \* \* \* The sun shone now and then, and there was no wind, but all things looked cheerless and distinct; no meltings of sky into mountains, the mountains like stone work wrought up with huge hammers. Last Sunday was as mild a day as I ever remember. \* \* \* Mary and I went round the lakes. There were flowers of various kinds—the topmost bell of a foxglove, geraniums, daisies, a buttercup in the water (but this I saw two or three days before), small yellow flowers (I do not know their name) in the turf. A large bunch of strawberry blossoms. \* \* \* It is Christmas Day, Saturday, 25th December 1802. I am thirty-one years of age. It is a dull, frosty day.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: William and his younger brother John, on the way to visit Mary Hutchinson, whom William was to marry two and a half years later.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Sir Michael le Fleming's estate, Rydal Hall. "Without": outside or beyond.[Return to reference 2](#)



- Note 3: The Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: William's "Resolution and Independence," composed one and a half years later, incorporated various details of Dorothy's description of the leech gatherer. See May 4 and 7, 1802 (pp. 442 and 443, above), for William working on the poem he originally called "The Leech Gatherer."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Two shillings, six pence.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The sheepfold (pen for sheep) in William's "Michael." Lines 1–7 of the poem describe the walk up Greenhead Gill.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A quotation from William's "Simon Lee": "Alas! the gratitude of men / Has oft'ner left me mourning."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Identified as Samuel Daniel's poem *Musophiles: Containing a General Defence of Learning* (1599).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: For a journey to Keswick to visit Coleridge.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: It had been arranged several months earlier that William was to marry Mary Hutchinson (Sara is Mary's sister, with whom Coleridge had fallen in love). Now the Wordsworths resolve to go to France to settle affairs with Annette Vallon, mother of William's daughter, Caroline. William did not conceal the facts of his early love affair from his family, or from Mary Hutchinson.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "To the Cuckoo."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Catherine Clarkson, the wife of the anti-slave-trade campaigner Thomas Clarkson, was a neighbor and became one of Dorothy Wordsworth's closest friends.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: William did not compose his poem on the daffodils, "I wandered lonely as a cloud," until two years later. Comparison with the poem will show how extensive was his use of Dorothy's prose description (p. 379, above).[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: William Enfield's *The Speaker* (1774), a volume of selections suitable for elocution.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: William's poem beginning "Among all lovely things my Love had been," composed four days earlier; "my Love" in this line is Dorothy.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The short lyric "Written in March."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: William never published his comic poem "The Tinkers." It was first printed in 1897.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The poem that was published as "Resolution and Independence" (see pp. 375–79, above). For its origin see the entry for October 3, 1800 (p. 437).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The rock, which has since been blasted away to make room for a new road, contained the carved letters W. W., M. H., D. W., S. T. C., J. W., and S. H.: William Wordsworth, Mary Hutchinson, Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Wordsworth, and Sara Hutchinson.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: From the ballad "Sir Patrick Spens" (see p. 38, above).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: William never completed this poem.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The *Monthly Review* for March 1802.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Later entries show, however, that William kept working on the manuscript until July 4.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: On the way to France to visit Annette Vallon and Caroline (see the entry for March 22, 1802, pp. 439–40).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Compare William's sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" (p. 388, above).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The actual date was August 1. One of the walks by the sea that Dorothy goes on to describe was the occasion for William's sonnet "It is a beauteous evening" (see p. 388, above).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The Wordsworths have come to Gallow Hill, Yorkshire, for the marriage of William and Mary. The people mentioned are Mary's sisters and brothers (Sara, Joanna, Tom, Jack, and

George Hutchinson). Out of consideration for Dorothy's overwrought feelings, only Joanna, Jack, and Tom attended the ceremony at Brampton Church.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Dorothy accompanied William and Mary on the three-day journey back to their cottage at Grasmere.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Grasmere—A Fragment

Peaceful our valley, fair and green,  
And beautiful her cottages,  
Each in its nook, its sheltered hold,  
Or underneath its tuft of trees.

5 Many and beautiful they are;  
But there is *one* that I love best,  
A lowly shed, in truth, it is,  
A brother of the rest.

10 Yet when I sit on rock or hill,  
Down looking on the valley fair,  
That Cottage with its clustering trees  
Summons my heart; it settles there.

15 Others there are whose small domain  
Of fertile fields and hedgerows green  
Might more seduce a wanderer's mind  
To wish that *there* his home had been.

20 Such wish be his! I blame him not,  
My fancies they perchance are wild  
—I love that house because it is  
The very Mountains' child.

Fields hath it of its own, green fields,  
But they are rocky steep and bare;  
Their fence is of the mountain stone,  
And moss and lichen flourish there.

25 And when the storm comes from the North  
It lingers near that pastoral spot,

And, piping through the mossy walls,  
It seems delighted with its lot.

30 And let it take its own delight;  
And let it range the pastures bare;  
Until it reach that group of trees,  
—It may not enter there!

35 A green unfading grove it is,  
Skirted with many a lesser tree,  
Hazel and holly, beech and oak,  
A bright and flourishing company.

40 Precious the shelter of those trees;  
They screen the cottage that I love;  
The sunshine pierces to the roof,  
And the tall pine-trees tower above.

When first I saw that dear abode,  
It was a lovely winter's day:  
After a night of perilous storm  
The west wind ruled with gentle sway;

45 A day so mild, it might have been  
The first day of the gladsome spring;  
The robins warbled, and I heard  
One solitary throstle sing.

50 A Stranger, Grasmere, in thy Vale,  
All faces then to me unknown,  
I left my sole companion-friend  
To wander out alone.

Lured by a little winding path,  
I quitted soon the public road,  
A smooth and tempting path it was,  
By sheep and shepherds trod.

55 Eastward, toward the lofty hills,  
This pathway led me on  
Until I reached a stately Rock,  
With velvet moss o'ergrown.

60 With russet oak and tufts of fern  
Its top was richly garlanded;  
Its sides adorned with eglantine  
Bedropp'd with hips of glossy red.

65 There, too, in many a sheltered chink  
The foxglove's broad leaves flourished fair,  
And silver birch whose purple twigs  
Bend to the softest breathing air.

70 Beneath that Rock my course I stayed,  
And, looking to its summit high,  
"Thou wear'st," said I, "a splendid garb,  
Here winter keeps his revelry.

75 "Full long a dweller on the Plains,  
I griev'd when summer days were gone;  
No more I'll grieve; for Winter here  
Hath pleasure gardens of his own.

80 "What need of flowers? The splendid moss  
Is gayer than an April mead;  
More rich its hues of various green,  
Orange, and gold, & glittering red."

—Beside that gay and lovely Rock  
There came with merry voice  
A foaming streamlet glancing by;  
It seemed to say "Rejoice!"

My youthful wishes all fulfill'd,

85

Wishes matured by thoughtful choice,  
I stood an Inmate of this vale  
How *could* I but rejoice?

ca. 1802–05

1892

# Floating Island<sup>1</sup>

Harmonious Powers with Nature work  
On sky, earth, river, lake and sea;  
Sunshine and cloud, whirlwind and breeze,  
All in one duteous task agree.

5       Once did I see a slip of earth  
(By throbbing waves long undermined)  
Loosed from its hold; how, no one knew,  
But all might see it float, obedient to the wind;

10       Might see it, from the mossy shore  
Dissevered, float upon the Lake,  
Float with its crest of trees adorned  
On which the warbling birds their pastime take.

15       Food, shelter, safety, there they find;  
There berries ripen, flowerets bloom;  
There insects live their lives, and die;  
A peopled world it is; in size a tiny room.

20       And thus through many seasons' space  
This little Island may survive;  
But Nature, though we mark her not,  
Will take away, may cease to give.

Perchance when you are wandering forth  
Upon some vacant sunny day,  
Without an object, hope, or fear,  
Thither your eyes may turn—the Isle is passed away;

Buried beneath the glittering Lake,<sup>2</sup>



25                      Its place no longer to be found;  
                         Yet the lost fragments shall remain  
                         To fertilize some other ground.

1828–32

1842

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A manuscript version of this poem in Dorothy Wordsworth's notebook carries the title "Floating Island at Hawkshead, An Incident in the Schemes of Nature." (Hawkshead is a small village close to the Wordsworths' Lake District home.) Our text follows the published version of the poem as it appeared under the title "Floating Island" in William Wordsworth's *Poems* (1842), where William included it with an attribution to "D. W.," "Author of the Address to the Wind, &c." In his travel book *Guide to the Lakes* (5th ed., 1835), William also engaged this strange natural phenomenon: "there occasionally appears above the surface of Derwentwater, and always in the same place, a considerable tract of spongy ground covered with aquatic plants, which is called the Floating, but with more propriety might be named the Buoyant, Island."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Among several differences in punctuation between the notebook and the published version, this line in the notebook concludes emphatically, with an exclamation point: "Buried beneath the glittering Lake!"[Return to reference 2](#)

## Thoughts on My Sick-Bed<sup>1</sup>

And has the remnant of my life  
Been pilfered of this sunny Spring?  
And have its own prelusive sounds  
Touched in my heart no echoing string?

5 Ah! say not so—the hidden life  
Couchant<sup>o</sup> within this feeble frame  
Hath been enriched by kindred gifts,  
That, undesired, unsought-for, came

10 With joyful heart in youthful days  
When fresh each season in its Round  
I welcomed the earliest Celandine  
Glittering upon the mossy ground;

15 With busy eyes I pierced the lane  
In quest of known and *unknown* things,  
—The primrose a lamp on its fortress rock,  
The silent butterfly spreading its wings,

20 The violet betrayed by its noiseless breath,  
The daffodil dancing in the breeze,  
The carolling thrush, on his naked perch,  
Towering above the budding trees.

Our cottage-hearth no longer our home,  
Companions of Nature were we,  
The Stirring, the Still, the Loquacious, the Mute—  
To all we gave our sympathy.

Yet never in those careless days  
When spring-time in rock, field, or bower

25        Was but a fountain of earthly hope  
          A promise of fruits & the *splendid* flower.

30        No! then I never felt a bliss  
          That might with *that* compare  
          Which, piercing to my couch of rest,  
          Came on the vernal air.

35        When loving Friends an offering brought,  
          The first flowers of the year,  
          Culled from the precincts of our home,  
          From nooks to Memory dear.

40        With some sad thoughts the work was done,  
          Unprompted and unbidden,  
          But joy it brought to my *hidden* life,  
          To consciousness no longer hidden.

          I felt a Power unfelt before,  
          Controlling weakness, languor, pain;  
          It bore me to the Terrace walk  
          I trod the Hills again;—

45        No prisoner in this lonely room,  
          I *saw* the green Banks of the Wye,  
          Recalling thy prophetic words,  
          Bard, Brother, Friend from infancy!

50        No need of motion, or of strength,  
          Or even the breathing air:  
          —I thought of Nature's loveliest scenes;  
          And with Memory I was there.

May 1832

1978

## Endnotes

- Note 1: In a letter of May 25, 1832, William Wordsworth's daughter Dora mentions this as "an affecting poem which she [her aunt Dorothy] has written on the pleasure she received from the first spring flowers that were carried up to her when confined to her sick room." The lines refer to half a dozen or more poems by William, including "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (in line 18) and "Tintern Abbey" (lines 45–52).[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *lying*[Return to reference °](#)

# **SIR WALTER SCOTT**

## **1771–1832**

Walter Scott was born in Edinburgh, but as a small boy, to improve his health, he lived for some years with his grandparents on their farm in the Scottish Border country (the part of southern Scotland lying immediately north of the border with England). This region was rich in ballad and folklore, much of it associated with the Border warfare between northern English and southern Scottish raiders. As a child Scott listened eagerly to stories about the past, especially to accounts by survivors of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, the last in a series of ill-fated attempts to restore to the throne of Britain the Stuart dynasty, who had been living in exile since 1688. The defeat of the ragtag army of Scottish Highland soldiers who had rallied around Charles Edward Stuart brought to an end not just the Jacobite cause but also the quasi-feudal power that the Highland chiefs had exercised over their clans. The Highlands' native traditions were suppressed by a government in London that was determined, to the point of brutality, to integrate all its Scottish subjects more fully into the United Kingdom. Ideally situated to witness these social and cultural transformations, Scott early acquired what he exploited throughout his work—a sense of history as associated with a specific place and a sense of the past that is kept alive, tenuously, in the oral traditions of the present.

Scott's father was a lawyer, and he himself was trained in the law, becoming in 1799 sheriff (local judge) of Selkirkshire, a Border

county, and in 1806 clerk of session—that is, secretary to the highest civil court in Scotland—in Edinburgh. Scott viewed the law, in its development over the centuries, as embodying the changing social customs of the country and an important element in social history, and he often used it (as in *The Heart of Midlothian* and *Redgauntlet*) to give a special dimension to his fiction.

From early childhood Scott was an avid reader of ballads and poetic romances, which with his phenomenal memory he effortlessly memorized. He began his literary career as a poet, first as a translator of German ballad imitations and then as a writer of such imitations. In 1799 he set out on the collecting expedition that resulted in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–3), his compilation of Border ballads. Motivating the collection was Scott's belief that the authentic features of the Scottish character were "daily melting . . . into those of her . . . ally" (that is, England), but he had fewer compunctions than modern folklorists about "improving" the ballads he and assistants transcribed from the recitations of elderly peasant women and shepherds. Scott turned next to composing long narrative poems set in medieval times, the best-known of which are *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), *Marmion* (1808), and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). Although these "metrical romances" were sensational best sellers (in 1830 Scott estimated that *The Lay* had sold thirty thousand copies) and helped establish nineteenth-century culture's vogue for medieval chivalry, Scott eventually gave up poetry for prose fiction. "Byron beat me," he explained, referring to the fact that his metrical romances ended up eclipsed by his rival's even more exotic "Eastern tales."

Scott continued to write lyric poems, which he inserted in his novels. Some of the lyrics, including "Proud Maisie," are based on the folk ballad and capture remarkably the terse suggestiveness of the oral form. *Waverley* (1814), which deals with the Jacobite defeat in 1745, introduced a motif that would remain central to Scott's fiction: the protagonist mediates between a heroic but violent old world that can no longer survive and an emerging new world that will be both safer than the old one—ensuring the security of

property and the rule of law—and duller, allowing few opportunities for adventure. The novels negotiate between preserving the last traces of the traditional cultures whose disappearance they chronicle—for instance, the Scots superstitions and distinctive speech forms that feature in the ghost story that Wandering Willie recounts in *Redgauntlet* and the song, “Proud Maisie,” that Madge Wildfire sings in *The Heart of Midlothian*—and representing, through the long views of the novels’ impersonal narrators, the iron laws of historical development, as those were expounded in the emerging Scottish Enlightenment disciplines of political economy, sociology, and anthropology. This approach to representing change, one that acquiesces in the necessity of social progress but also nostalgically acknowledges the allure of the backward past, was timely. It appealed powerfully to a generation that, following the British victory at Waterloo, was both eager to think that a new period in its history had begun and yet reluctant to turn its back on the past, not least because devotion to its shared historical heritage might help reunify a fragmented nation. Scott did not invent the historical novel, and indeed was readier than most twentieth-century critics to acknowledge that he had been influenced by the women novelists who dominated the literary scene before his debut, but his example established the significance the form would henceforth claim.

Scott published all his novels anonymously, an index of how a gentleman-poet, even at the start of the nineteenth century, might find fiction a disreputable occupation. However, his authorship of “the Waverley Series” was an open secret, and Scott became the most internationally famous novelist as well as the most prolific writer of the day. In 1811 he started building his palatial country house at Abbotsford, a place that, characteristically, he both equipped with up-to-date indoor plumbing and gas lighting and stocked with antiquarian relics. There he enacted his vision of himself as a country gentleman of the old school. Though in 1820 he acquired the title of baronet and thus added a “Sir” to his name, this glamorous persona of the Scottish laird depended on his hardheaded, unromantic readiness to conceive of literature as a

business. To support his expenditures at Abbotsford, Scott wrote (as Thomas Carlyle put it disapprovingly in 1838) "with the ardour of a steam-engine" and participated in a number of commercial ventures in printing and publishing. In the crash of 1826, as a result of the failure of the publishing firm of Constable, Scott was financially ruined. He insisted on working off his huge debts by his pen and exhausted himself in the effort to do so. Not until after his death were his creditors finally paid off in full with the proceeds of the continuing sale of his novels.



# ***From The Lay of the Last Minstrel*<sup>1</sup>**

## ***Introduction***

The way was long, the wind was cold,  
The Minstrel was infirm and old;  
His withered cheek, and tresses gray,  
Seemed to have known a better day;  
5 The harp, his sole remaining joy,  
Was carried by an orphan boy.  
The last of all the Bards was he,  
Who sung of Border chivalry;  
For, well-a-day! their date was fled,  
10 His tuneful brethren all were dead;  
And he, neglected and oppressed,  
Wished to be with them, and at rest.  
No more, on prancing palfrey<sup>o</sup> borne,  
He carolled, light as lark at morn;  
15 No longer, courted and caressed,  
High placed in hall, a welcome guest,  
He poured, to lord and lady gay,  
The unpremeditated lay;  
Old times were changed, old manners gone,  
20 A stranger<sup>2</sup> filled the Stuarts' throne;  
The bigots of the iron time  
Had called his harmless art a crime.  
A wandering harper, scorned and poor,  
He begged his bread from door to door;  
25 And tuned, to please a peasant's ear,  
The harp, a King had loved to hear.

He passed where Newark's<sup>3</sup> stately tower

Looks out from Yarrow's birchen bower:  
The Minstrel gazed with wishful eye—  
No humbler resting place was nigh.  
30 With hesitating step, at last,  
The embattled portal-arch he passed,  
Whose ponderous grate, and massy bar,  
Had oft rolled back the tide of war,  
But never closed the iron door  
35 Against the desolate and poor.  
The Duchess marked his weary pace,  
His timid mien, and reverend face,  
And bade her page the menials<sup>o</sup> tell,  
That they should tend the old man well:  
40 For she had known adversity,  
Though born in such a high degree;  
In pride of power, in beauty's bloom,  
Had wept o'er Monmouth's bloody tomb!<sup>4</sup>

45 When kindness had his wants supplied,  
And the old man was gratified,  
Began to rise his minstrel pride.  
And he began to talk, anon,  
Of good Earl Francis, dead and gone,  
And of Earl Walter, rest him God!<sup>5</sup>  
50 A braver ne'er to battle rode;  
And how full many a tale he knew,  
Of the old warriors of Buccleuch;  
And, would the noble Duchess deign  
To listen to an old man's strain,  
55 Though stiff his hand, his voice though weak,  
He thought even yet, the sooth<sup>o</sup> to speak,  
That, if she loved the harp to hear,  
He could make music to her ear.

60 The humble boon was soon obtained;  
The aged Minstrel audience gained.

But, when he reached the room of state,  
Where she, with all her ladies, sate,  
Perchance he wished his boon denied;  
For, when to tune his harp he tried,  
65 His trembling hand had lost the ease,  
Which marks security to please;  
And scenes, long past, of joy and pain,  
Came wildering o'er his aged brain—  
He tried to tune his harp in vain.  
70 The pitying Duchess praised its chime,  
And gave him heart, and gave him time,  
Till every string's according glee  
Was blended into harmony.  
And then, he said, he would full fain  
75 He could recall an ancient strain,  
He never thought to sing again.  
It was not framed for village churls,  
But for high dames and mighty earls;  
He had played it to King Charles the Good  
80 When he kept court at Holyrood;<sup>6</sup>  
And much he wished, yet feared, to try  
The long-forgotten melody.  
Amid the strings his fingers strayed,  
And an uncertain warbling made—  
85 And oft he shook his hoary<sup>o</sup> head.  
But when he caught the measure wild,  
The old man raised his face, and smiled;  
And lightened up his faded eye,  
With all a poet's extacy!  
90 In varying cadence, soft or strong,  
He swept the sounding chords along;  
The present scene, the future lot,  
His toils, his wants, were all forgot;  
Cold diffidence, and age's frost,  
95 In the full tide of song were lost.

Each blank, in faithless memory void,  
The poet's glowing thought supplied;  
And, while his harp responsive rung,  
'Twas thus the LATEST MINSTREL sung.

100

1805

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Scott's first metrical romance interweaves two stories and boasts more than a hundred pages of historical notes. One story is set in the 16th century and combines the Border legend of the goblin Gilpin Horner with a story of the magic spells cast by the dowager lady of Branksome, who hopes to use a long-hidden book of black arts to avenge the death of her husband at the hands of a neighboring clan. In the second story, which unfolds across the introductions and endings of the poem's six cantos, the 17th-century minstrel who tells or sings the story of this witch's plot (a lay is a song) emerges as hero. In his prose preface Scott described this minstrel, who has "survived the Revolution" of 1688, as a figure of historical transition. He has caught "somewhat of the refinement of modern poetry without losing the simplicity of his original model"—a hint that the relationship between this figure and his 17th-century listeners mirrors Scott's relationship with his 19th-century audience. But in addition to allying his authorship with his minstrel's improvised vocal performance, Scott associates himself with the power of the written word: the "wondrous book" that the Lady of Branksome seeks is buried inside the grave of a wizard suggestively named "Michael Scott."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: William III, who in 1688 ascended to the British throne after Parliament coerced the last Stuart monarch, the Catholic James II, into fleeing to France.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Newark Castle, located in the Border district, at a bend of the river Yarrow.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: The duchess, identified in Scott's footnote as Anne, Duchess of Buccleuch, was, in addition to being a descendant of the Lady of Branksome whose black magic will figure in the minstrel's story, the widow of the Duke of Monmouth. A bastard son of Charles II, Monmouth was executed in 1685 after his unsuccessful insurrection against his uncle James II. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In footnotes Scott identifies Earl Francis and Earl Walter as the father and grandfather of the duchess. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Having ascended to the throne of England in 1626, Charles I traveled to the palace of Holyrood in Edinburgh in 1633 to receive the crown of Scotland. [Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *saddle horse* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *servants* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *truth* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gray with age* [Return to reference °](#)

## Proud Maisie<sup>1</sup>

Proud Maisie is in the wood  
Walking so early;  
Sweet Robin sits on the bush,  
Singing so rarely.

5 "Tell me, thou bonny bird,  
When shall I marry me?"—  
"When six braw<sup>o</sup> gentlemen  
Kirkward shall carry ye."

"Who makes the bridal bed,  
Birdie, say truly?"—  
10 "The gray-headed sexton  
That delves the grave duly.

"The glowworm o'er grave and stone  
Shall light thee steady,  
15 The owl from the steeple sing,  
'Welcome, proud lady.' "

1818

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The "fragment" of a song heard by the characters in *The Heart of Midlothian* who attend the insane gypsy Madge Wildfire on her deathbed (chap. 40). [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- <sup>o</sup>: *fine* [Return to reference <sup>o</sup>](#)

## **Wandering Willie's Tale**    "Wandering Willie's Tale"

forms part of *Redgauntlet* (1824), Scott's most formally inventive novel and the last of his major fictions set in the Border country. It is told by the blind fiddler Willie Steenson to a young gentleman of a romantic temperament, Darsie Latimer, who on a whim has joined him in his cross-country wandering and who subsequently writes down Willie's tale and sends it off in a letter to a friend in Edinburgh. (*Redgauntlet* begins, though after its first third does not continue, as a novel in letters, the eighteenth-century form that Scott revived for this book he called his "Tale of the Eighteenth Century.") Like most of Scott's fiction, then, "Wandering Willie's Tale" juxtaposes oral storytelling against written records, while also moving among several time frames: 1765, when Willie recounts to Darsie the tale he heard from his grandfather, the piper Steenie Steenson; the year—sometime in the early 1690s—when the events Steenie experienced occurred; and also the four decades before 1690, in which the central figure in the story, Sir Robert Redgauntlet, committed the wicked deeds for which, in the course of the tale, he will pay at last. The story likewise mixes fiction and history: Steenie's journey to the underworld, where he pursues the fictional Redgauntlet and thereby recovers a lost piece of his own past, gives Scott a device for making his reader acquainted with some central figures of seventeenth-century Scottish history.

We follow the text of the "Magnum Opus" edition of his works, which Scott prepared in 1832 and in which he officially acknowledged authorship of his novels; we omit, however, the long historical notes he added to that edition.

Scott's simulation of Willie's Scots dialect becomes easier to understand when one hears rather than reads it, so reading the tale aloud is advised.

## ***From REDGAUNTLET***

### **Wandering Willie's Tale**

Ye maun<sup>1</sup> have heard of Sir Robert Redgauntlet of that Ilk, who lived in these parts before the dear years.<sup>2</sup> The country will lang mind him; and our fathers used to draw breath thick if ever they heard him named. He was out wi' the Hielandmen in Montrose's time; and again he was in the hills wi' Glencairn in the saxteen hundred and fifty-twa; and sae when King Charles the Second came in, wha was in sic<sup>3</sup> favour as the Laird of Redgauntlet?<sup>4</sup> He was knighted at Lonon court, wi' the King's ain sword; and being a redhot prelatist, he came down here, rampaung like a lion, with commissions of lieutenancy (and of lunacy, for what I ken<sup>5</sup>), to put down a' the Whigs and Covenanters in the country. Wild wark they made of it, for the Whigs were as dour as the Cavaliers were fierce, and it was which should first tire the other. Redgauntlet was aye<sup>6</sup> for the strong hand; and his name is kend as wide in the country as Claverhouse's or Tarn Dalzell's.<sup>7</sup> Glen, nor dargle,<sup>8</sup> nor mountain, nor cave, could hide the puir hill-folk when Redgauntlet was out with bugle and bloodhound after them, as if they had been sae mony deer. And troth when they fand them, they didna mak muckle<sup>9</sup> mair ceremony than a Hielandman wi' a roebuck—It was just, "Will ye tak the test?"—if not, "Make ready—present—fire!"—and there lay the recusant.<sup>1</sup>

Far and wide was Sir Robert hated and feared. Men thought he had a direct compact with Satan—that he was proof against steel—and that bullets happed aff his buff-coat like hailstones from a hearth—that he had a mear that would turn a hare on the side of Carrifra-gawns<sup>2</sup>—and muckle to the same purpose, of whilk mair anon. The best blessing they wared<sup>3</sup> on him was, "Deil scowp wi' Redgauntlet!"<sup>4</sup> He wasna a bad maister to his ain folk though, and



was weel aneugh liked by his tenants; and as for the lackies and troopers that raid out wi' him to the persecutions, as the Whigs caa'd those killing times, they wad hae drunken themsells blind to his health at any time.

Now you are to ken that my gudesire<sup>5</sup> lived on Redgauntlet's grund—they ca' the place Primrose-Knowe. We had lived on the grund, and under the Redgauntlets, since the riding days,<sup>6</sup> and lang before. It was a pleasant bit; and I think the air is callerer<sup>7</sup> and fresher there than ony where else in the country. It's a' deserted now; and I sat on the broken door-cheek three days since, and was glad I couldna see the plight the place was in; but that's a' wide o' the mark.<sup>8</sup> There dwelt my gudesire, Steenie Steenson, a rambling, rattling chiel<sup>9</sup> he had been in his young days, and could play weel on the pipes; he was famous at "Hoopers and Girders"—a' Cumberland couldna touch him at "Jockie Lattin"—and he had the finest finger for the back-lill<sup>1</sup> between Berwick and Carlisle. The like o' Steenie wasna the sort that they made Whigs o'. And so he became a Tory, as they ca' it, which we now ca' Jacobites,<sup>2</sup> just out of a kind of needcessity, that he might belang to some side or other. He had nae ill-will to the Whig bodies, and liked little to see the blude rin, though, being obliged to follow Sir Robert in hunting and hosting, watching and warding,<sup>3</sup> he saw muckle mischief, and maybe did some, that he couldna avoid.

Now Steenie was a kind of favourite with his master, and kend a' the folks about the castle, and was often sent for to play the pipes when they were at their merriment. Auld Dougal MacCallum, the butler, that had followed Sir Robert through gude and ill, thick and thin, pool and stream, was specially fond of the pipes, and aye gae<sup>4</sup> my gudesire his gude word wi' the Laird; for Dougal could turn his master round his finger.

Weel, round came the Revolution,<sup>5</sup> and it had like to have broken the hearts baith of Dougal and his master. But the change was not a'thegether sae great as they feared, and other folk thought for. The Whigs made an unco crawling<sup>6</sup> what they wad do with their auld

enemies, and in special wi' Sir Robert Redgauntlet. But there were ower many great folks dipped in the same doings, to mak a spick and span new world. So parliament passed it a' ower easy; and Sir Robert, bating<sup>7</sup> that he was held to hunting foxes instead of Covenanters, remained just the man he was. He revel was as loud, and his hall as weel lighted, as ever it had been, though maybe he lacked the fines of the nonconformists, that used to come to stock his larder and cellar; for it is certain he began to be keener about the rents than his tenants used to find him before, and they behoved to be<sup>8</sup> prompt to the rent-day, or else the Laird wasna pleased. And he was sic an awesome body, that naebody cared to anger him; for the oaths he swore, and the rage that he used to get into, and the looks that he put on, made men sometimes think him a devil incarnate.

Weel, my gudesire was nae manager—no that he was a very great misguider—but he hadna the saving gift, and he got twa terms' rent in arrear. He got the first brash at Whitsunday put ower wi' fair word and piping; but when Martinmas came, there was a summons from the grund-officer to come wi' the rent on a day preceese, or else Steenie behoved to flit.<sup>9</sup> Sair wark<sup>1</sup> he had to get the siller; but he was weel-freended, and at last he got the haill<sup>2</sup> scraped thegither—a thousand merks—the maist of it was from a neighbour they caa'd Laurie Lapraik—a sly tod.<sup>3</sup> Laurie had walth o' gear<sup>4</sup>—could hunt wi' the hound and rin wi' the hare—and be Whig or Tory, saunt or sinner, as the wind stood. He was a professor in this Revolution warld, but he liked an orra sough of this warld;<sup>5</sup> and a tune on the pipes weel aneugh at a bytime, and abune a',<sup>6</sup> he thought he had gude security for the siller he lent my gudesire ower the stocking at Primrose-Knowe.<sup>7</sup>

Away trots my gudesire to Redgauntlet Castle, wi' a heavy purse and a light heart, glad to be out of the Laird's danger. Weel, the first thing he learned at the Castle was, that Sir Robert had fretted himself into a fit of the gout, because he did not appear before twelve o'clock. It wasna a'thegether for sake of the money, Dougal

thought; but because he didna like to part wi' my gudesire aff the grund. Dougal was glad to see Steenie, and brought him into the great oak parlour, and there sat the Laird his leesome lane, excepting that he had beside him a great, ill-favoured jackanape,<sup>8</sup> that was a special pet of his; a cankered beast it was, and mony an ill-natured trick it played—ill to please it was, and easily angered—ran about the haill castle, chattering and yowling, and pinching and biting folk, especially before ill weather, or disturbances in the state. Sir Robert caa'd it Major Weir, after the warlock that was burnt;<sup>9</sup> and few folk liked either the name or the conditions of the creature—they thought there was something in it by ordinar—and my gudesire was not just easy in his mind when the door shut on him, and he saw himself in the room wi' naebody but the Laird, Dougal MacCallum, and the Major, a thing that hadna chanced to him before.

Sir Robert sat, or, I should say, lay, in a great armed chair, wi' his grand velvet gown, and his feet on a cradle; for he had baith gout and gravel, and his face looked as gash and ghastly as Satan's. Major Weir sat opposite to him, in a red laced coat, and the Laird's wig<sup>1</sup> on his head; and aye as Sir Robert girned<sup>2</sup> wi' pain, the jackanape girned too, like a sheep's-head between a pair of tangs—an ill-faured,<sup>3</sup> fearsome couple they were. The Laird's buff-coat was hung on a pin behind him, and his broadsword and his pistols within reach; for he keepit up the auld fashion of having the weapons ready, and a horse saddled day and night, just as he used to do when he was able to loup on horseback, and away after ony of the hill-folk he could get speerings<sup>4</sup> of. Some said it was for fear of the Whigs taking vengeance, but I judge it was just his auld custom—he wasna gien to fear ony thing. The rental-book, wi' its black cover and brass clasps, was lying beside him; and a book of sculduddry sangs<sup>5</sup> was put betwixt the leaves, to keep it open at the place where it bore evidence against the Goodman of Primrose-Knowe, as behind the hand with his mails and duties.<sup>6</sup> Sir Robert gave my gudesire a look, as if he would have withered his heart in his bosom. Ye maun ken he had a way of bending his brows, that men saw the

visible mark of a horse-shoe in his forehead, deep-dinted, as if it had been stamped there.

"Are ye come light-handed, ye son of a toom whistle?" said Sir Robert. "Zounds! if you are"—

My gudesire, with as gude a countenance as he could put on, made a leg,<sup>7</sup> and placed the bag of money on the table wi' a dash, like a man that does something clever. The Laird drew it to him hastily—"Is it all here, Steenie, man?"

"Your honour will find it right," said my gudesire.

"Here, Dougal," said the Laird, "gie Steenie a tass<sup>8</sup> of brandy down stairs, till I count the siller and write the receipt."

But they werena weel out of the room, when Sir Robert gied a yelloch that garr'd<sup>9</sup> the Castle rock! Back ran Dougal—in flew the livery-men—yell on yell gied the Laird, ilk ane mair awfu' than the ither. My gudesire knew not whether to stand or flee, but he ventured back into the parlour, where a' was gaun hirdy-girdie—naebody to say "come in," or "gae out." Terribly the Laird roared for cauld water to his feet, and wine to cool his throat; and hell, hell, hell, and its flames, was aye the word in his mouth. They brought him water, and when they plunged his swoln feet into the tub, he cried out it was burning; and folk say that it *did* bubble and sparkle like a seething cauldron. He flung the cup at Dougal's head, and said he had given him blood instead of burgundy; and, sure aneugh, the lass washed clotted blood aff the carpet the neist day. The jackanape they caa'd Major Weir, it jibbered and cried as if it was mocking its master; my gudesire's head was like to turn—he forgot baith siller and receipt, and down stairs he banged; but as he ran, the shrieks came faint and fainter; there was a deep-drawn shivering groan, and word gaed through the Castle, that the Laird was dead.

Weel, away came my gudesire, wi' his finger in his mouth, and his best hope was, that Dougal had seen the money-bag, and heard the Laird speak of writing the receipt. The young Laird, now Sir John, came from Edinburgh, to see things put to rights. Sir John and his father never gree'd weel. Sir John had been bred an advocate, and afterwards sat in the last Scots Parliament and voted for the

Union, having gotten, it was thought, a rug of the compensations<sup>1</sup>—if his father could have come out of his grave, he would have brained him for it on his awn hearthstane. Some thought it was easier counting with the auld rough Knight than the fair-spoken young ane—but mair of that anon.

Dougal MacCallum, poor body, neither grat<sup>2</sup> nor graned, but gaed about the house looking like a corpse, but directing, as was his duty, a' the order of the grand funeral. Now, Dougal looked aye waur and waur<sup>3</sup> when night was coming, and was aye the last to gang to his bed, whilk was in a little round just opposite the chamber of dais,<sup>4</sup> whilk his master occupied while he was living, and where he now lay in state, as they caa'd it, weel-a-day! The night before the funeral, Dougal could keep his awn counsel<sup>5</sup> nae langer; he came doun with his proud spirit, and fairly asked auld Hutcheon to sit in his room with him for an hour. When they were in the round, Dougal took ae tass of brandy to himsell, and gave another to Hutcheon, and wished him all health and lang life, and said that, for himsell, he wasna lang for this world; for that, every night since Sir Robert's death, his silver call had sounded from the state chamber, just as it used to do at nights in his lifetime, to call Dougal to help to turn him in his bed. Dougal said, that being alone with the dead on that floor of the tower (for naebody cared to wake Sir Robert Redgauntlet like another corpse), he had never daured to answer the call, but that now his conscience checked him for neglecting his duty; for, "though death breaks service," said MacCallum, "it shall never break my service to Sir Robert; and I will answer his next whistle, so be you will stand by me, Hutcheon."

Hutcheon had nae will to the wark, but he had stood by Dougal in battle and broil, and he wad not fail him at this pinch; so down the carles<sup>6</sup> sat ower a stoup<sup>7</sup> of brandy, and Hutcheon, who was something of a clerk, would have read a chapter of the Bible; but Dougal would hear naething but a blaud<sup>8</sup> of Davie Lindsay, whilk was the waur preparation.

When midnight came, and the house was quiet as the grave, sure aneugh the silver whistle sounded as sharp and shrill as if Sir Robert was blowing it, and up gat the twa auld serving-men, and tottered into the room where the dead man lay. Hutcheon saw aneugh at the first glance; for there were torches in the room, which showed him the foul fiend in his ain shape, sitting on the Laird's coffin! Over he cowped<sup>9</sup> as if he had been dead. He could not tell how lang he lay in a trance at the door, but when he gathered himself, he cried on his neighbour, and getting nae answer, raised the house, when Dougal was found lying dead within twa steps of the bed where his master's coffin was placed. As for the whistle, it was gaen anes and aye;<sup>1</sup> but mony a time was it heard at the top of the house on the bartizan,<sup>2</sup> and amang the auld chimneys and turrets, where the howlets have their nests. Sir John hushed the matter up, and the funeral passed over without mair bogle-wark.<sup>3</sup>

But when a' was ower, and the Laird was beginning to settle his affairs, every tenant was called up for his arrears, and my gudesire for the full sum that stood against him in the rental-book. Weel, away he trots to the Castle, to tell his story, and there he is introduced to Sir John, sitting in his father's chair, in deep mourning, with weepers and hanging cravat,<sup>4</sup> and a small walking rapier by his side, instead of the auld broadsword that had a hundredweight of steel about it, what with blade, chape, and basket-hilt. I have heard their communing so often tauld ower, that I almost think I was there mysell, though I couldna be born at the time. . . .

"I wuss ye joy, sir, of the head seat, and the white loaf, and the braid lairdship.<sup>5</sup> Your father was a kind man to friends and followers; muckle grace to you, Sir John, to fill his shoon—his boots, I suld say, for he seldom wore shoon, unless it were muils<sup>6</sup> when he had the gout."

"Ay, Steenie," quoth the Laird, sighing deeply, and putting his napkin to his een, "his was a sudden call, and he will be missed in the country; no time to set his house in order—weel prepared Godward, no doubt, which is the root of the matter—but left us

behind a tangled hesp to wind,<sup>7</sup> Steenie.—Hem! hem! We maun go to business, Steenie; much to do, and little time to do it in.”

Here he opened the fatal volume. I have heard of a thing they call Doomsday-book<sup>8</sup>—I am clear it has been a rental of back-ganging<sup>9</sup> tenants.

“Stephen,” said Sir John, still in the same soft, sleekit tone of a voice—“Stephen Stevenson, or Steenson, ye are down here for a year’s rent behind the hand—due at last term.”

*Stephen.* “Please your honour, Sir John, I paid it to your father.”

*Sir John.* “Ye took a receipt then, doubtless, Stephen; and can produce it?”

*Stephen.* “Indeed I hadna time, an it like your honour; for nae sooner had I set doun the siller, and just as his honour Sir Robert, that’s gaen, drew it till him to count it, and write out the receipt, he was ta’en wi’ the pains that removed him.”

“That was unlucky,” said Sir John, after a pause. “But ye maybe paid it in the presence of somebody. I want but a *talis qualis*<sup>1</sup> evidence, Stephen. I would go ower strictly to work with no poor man.”

*Stephen.* “Troth, Sir John, there was naebody in the room but Dougal MacCallum, the butler. But, as your honour kens, he has e’en followed his auld master.”

“Very unlucky again, Stephen,” said Sir John, without altering his voice a single note. “The man to whom ye paid the money is dead—and the man who witnessed your payment is dead too—and the siller, which should have been to the fore, is neither seen nor heard tell of in the repositories. How am I to believe a’ this?”

*Stephen.* “I dinna ken, your honour; but there is a bit memorandum note of the very coins; for, God help me! I had to borrow out of twenty purses; and I am sure that ilka<sup>2</sup> men there set down will take his grit oath for what purpose I borrowed the money.”

*Sir John.* “I have little doubt that ye *borrowed* the money, Steenie. It is the *payment* to my father that I want to have some proof of.”



*Stephen.* "The siller maun be about the house, Sir John. And since your honour never got it, and his honour that was canna have ta'en it wi' him, maybe some of the family may have seen it."

*Sir John.* "We will examine the servants, Stephen; that is but reasonable."

But lackey and lass, and page and groom, all denied stoutly that they had ever seen such a bag of money as my gudesire described. What was waur, he had unluckily not mentioned to any living soul of them his purpose of paying his rent. Ae quean<sup>3</sup> had noticed something under his arm, but she took it for the pipes.

Sir John Redgauntlet ordered the servants out of the room, and then said to my gudesire, "Now, Steenie, ye see you have fair play; and, as I have little doubt ye ken better where to find the siller than any other body, I beg, in fair terms, and for your own sake, that you will end this fasherie;<sup>4</sup> for, Stephen, ye maun pay or flit."

"The Lord forgie your opinion," said Stephen, driven almost to his wit's end—"I am an honest man."

"So am I, Stephen," said his honour; "and so are all the folks in the house, I hope. But if there be a knave amongst us, it must be he that tells the story he cannot prove." He paused, and then added, mair sternly, "If I understand your trick, sir, you want to take advantage of some malicious reports concerning things in this family, and particularly respecting my father's sudden death, thereby to cheat me out of the money, and perhaps take away my character, by insinuating that I have received the rent I am demanding.—Where do you suppose this money to be?—I insist upon knowing."

My gudesire saw every thing look sae muckle against him that he grew nearly desperate—however, he shifted from one foot to another, looked to every corner of the room, and made no answer.

"Speak out, sirrah," said the Laird, assuming a look of his father's, a very particular ane, which he had when he was angry—it seemed as if the wrinkles of his frown made that selfsame fearful shape of a horse's shoe in the middle of his brow;—"Speak out, sir! I *will* know your thoughts;—do you suppose that I have this money?"

"Far be it frae me to say so," said Stephen.



"Do you charge any of my people with having taken it?"

"I wad be laith to charge them that may be innocent," said my gudesire; "and if there be any one that is guilty, I have nae proof."

"Somewhere the money must be, if there is a word of truth in your story," said Sir John; "I ask where you think it is—and demand a correct answer?"

"In hell, if you *will* have my thoughts of it," said my gudesire, driven to extremity,—*"in hell! with your father, his jackanape, and his silver whistle."*

Down the stairs he ran (for the parlour was nae place for him after such a word), and he heard the Laird swearing blood and wounds behind him, as fast as ever did Sir Robert, and roaring for the bailie and the baron-officer.

Away rode my gudesire to his chief creditor (him they caa'd Laurie Lapraik), to try if he could make ony thing out of him; but when he tauld his story, he got but the warst word in his wame<sup>5</sup>—thief, beggar, and dyvour,<sup>6</sup> were the safest terms; and to the boot of these hard terms, Laurie brought up the auld story of his dipping his hand in the blood of God's saunts, just as if a tenant could have helped riding with the Laird, and that a laird like Sir Robert Red-gauntlet. My gudesire was, by this time, far beyond the bounds of patience, and while he and Laurie were at deil speed the liars, he was wanchancie<sup>7</sup> aneugh to abuse Lapraik's doctrine as weel as the man, and said things that garr'd folk's flesh grue<sup>8</sup> that heard them;—he wasna just himsell, and he had lived wi' a wild set in his day.

At last they parted, and my gudesire was to ride hame through the wood of Pitmurkie, that is a' fou of black firs, as they say.—I ken the wood, but the firs may be black or white for what I can tell.—At the entry of the wood there is a wild common, and on the edge of the common, a little lonely change-house, that was keepit then by an ostler-wife, they suld hae caa'd her Tibbie Faw,<sup>9</sup> and there puir Steenie cried for a mutchkin of brandy, for he had had no refreshment the haill day. Tibbie was earnest wi' him to take a bite of meat, but he couldna think o't, nor would he take his foot out of

the stirrup, and took off the brandy wholly at twa draughts, and named a toast at each:—the first was, the memory of Sir Robert Redgauntlet, and might he never lie quiet in his grave till he had righted his poor bond-tenant; and the second was, a health to Man's Enemy, if he would but get him back the pock of siller, or tell him what came o't, for he saw the haill world was like to regard him as a thief and a cheat, and he took that waur than even the ruin of his house and hauld.<sup>1</sup>

On he rode, little caring where. It was a dark night turned, and the trees made it yet darker, and he let the beast take its ain road through the wood; when, all of a sudden, from tired and wearied that it was before, the nag began to spring, and flee, and stend, that my gudesire could hardly keep the saddle—Upon the whilk, a horseman, suddenly riding up beside him, said, "That's a mettle beast of yours, freend; will you sell him?"—So saying, he touched the horse's neck with his riding-wand, and it fell into its auld heigh-ho of a stumbling trot. "But his spunk's soon out of him, I think," continued the stranger, "and that is like mony a man's courage, that thinks he wad do great things till he came to the proof."

My gudesire scarce listened to this, but spurred his horse, with "Gude e'en to you, freend."

But it's like the stranger was ane that doesna lightly yield his point; for, ride as Steenie liked, he was aye beside him at the selfsame pace. At last my gudesire, Steenie Steenson, grew half angry; and, to say the truth, half feared.

"What is it that ye want with me, freend?" he said. "If ye be a robber, I have nae money; if ye be a leal<sup>2</sup> man, wanting company, I have nae heart to mirth or speaking; and if ye want to ken the road, I scarce ken it mysell."

"If you will tell me your grief," said the stranger, "I am one that, though I have been sair miscaa'd<sup>3</sup> in the world, am the only hand for helping my freends."

So my gudesire, to ease his ain heart, mair than from any hope of help, told him the story from beginning to end.

"It's a hard pinch," said the stranger; "but I think I can help you."

"If you could lend me the money, sir, and take a lang day<sup>4</sup>—I ken nae other help on earth," said my gudesire.

"But there may be some under the earth," said the stranger. "Come, I'll be frank wi' you; I could lend you the money on bond, but you would maybe scruple my terms. Now, I can tell you, that your auld Laird is disturbed in his grave by your curses, and the wailing of your family, and if ye daur venture to go to see him, he will give you the receipt."

My gudesire's hair stood on end at this proposal, but he thought his companion might be some humorsome chield that was trying to frighten him, and might end with lending him the money. Besides he was bauld wi' brandy, and desperate wi' distress; and he said, he had courage to go to the gate of hell, and a step farther, for that receipt.—The stranger laughed.

Weel, they rode on through the thickest of the wood, when, all of a sudden, the horse stopped at the door of a great house; and, but that he knew the place was ten miles off, my father would have thought he was at Redgauntlet Castle. They rode into the outer court-yard, through the muckle faulding yetts,<sup>5</sup> and aneath the auld portcullis; and the whole front of the house was lighted, and there were pipes and fiddles, and as much dancing and deray<sup>6</sup> within as used to be in Sir Robert's House at Pace and Yule,<sup>7</sup> and such high seasons. They lap off, and my gudesire, as seemed to him, fastened his horse to the very ring he had tied him to that morning, when he gaed to wait on the young Sir John.

"God!" said my gudesire, "if Sir Robert's death be but a dream!"

He knocked at the ha' door just as he was wont, and his auld acquaintance, Dougal MacCallum,—just after his wont, too,—came to open the door, and said, "Piper Steenie, are ye there, lad? Sir Robert has been crying for you."

My gudesire was like a man in a dream—he looked for the stranger, but he was gane for the time. At last he just tried to say, "Ha! Dougal Driveower,<sup>8</sup> are ye living? I thought ye had been dead."

“Never fash<sup>9</sup> yoursell wi’ me,” said Dougal, “but look to yoursell; and see ye take naething frae onybody here, neither meat, drink, or siller, except just the receipt that is your ain.”

So saying, he led the way out through halls and trances that were weel kend to my gudesire, and into the auld oak parlour; and there was as much singing of profane sangs, and birling<sup>1</sup> of red wine, and speaking blasphemy and sculduddry, as had ever been in Redgauntlet Castle when it was at the blithest.

But, Lord take us in keeping! what a set of ghastly revellers they were that sat round that table!—My gudesire kend mony that had long before gane to their place, for often had he piped to the most part in the hall of Redgauntlet. There was the fierce Middleton, and the dissolute Rothies, and the crafty Lauderdale; and Dalrymple, with his bald head and a beard to his girdle; and Earlsford, with Cameron’s blude on his hand; and wild Bonshaw, that tied blessed Mr Cargill’s limbs till the blude sprung; and Dumbarton Douglas, the twice-turned traitor baith to country and king. There was the Bluidy Advocate MacKenzie, who, for his worldly wit and wisdom, had been to the rest as a god.<sup>2</sup> And there was Claverhouse, as beautiful as when he lived, with his long, dark, curled locks, streaming down over his laced buff-coat, and his left hand always on his right spule-blade, to hide the wound that the silver bullet had made.<sup>3</sup> He sat apart from them all, and looked at them with a melancholy, haughty countenance; while the rest hallooed, and sung, and laughed, that the room rang. But their smiles were fearfully contorted from time to time; and their laughter passed into such wild sounds, as made my gudesire’s very nails grow blue, and chilled the marrow in his bones.

They that waited at the table were just the wicked serving-men and troopers, that had done their work and cruel bidding on earth. There was the Lang Lad of Nethertown, that helped to take Argyle; and the Bishop’s summoner, that they called the Deil’s Rattle-bag; and the wicked guardsmen, in their laced coats; and the savage Highland Amorites,<sup>4</sup> that shed blood like water; and many a proud serving-man, haughty of heart and bloody of hand, cringing to the rich, and making them wickedder than they would be; grinding the

poor to powder, when the rich had broken them into fragments. And mony, mony mair were coming and ganging, a' as busy in their vocation as if they had been alive.

Sir Robert Redgauntlet, in the midst of a' this fearful riot, cried, wi' a voice like thunder, on Steenie Piper, to come to the board-head where he was sitting; his legs stretched out before him, and swathed up with flannel, with his holster pistols aside him, while the great broadsword rested against his chair, just as my gudesire had seen him the last time upon earth—the very cushion for the jackanape was close to him, but the creature itsell was not there—it wasna its hour, it's likely; for he heard them say as he came forward, "Is not the Major come yet?" And another answered, "The jackanape will be here betimes the morn." And when my gudesire came forward, Sir Robert, or his ghaist, or the deevil in his likeness, said, "Weel, piper, hae ye settled wi' my son for the year's rent?"

With much ado my father gat breath to say, that Sir John would not settle without his honour's receipt.

"Ye shall hae that for a tune of the pipes, Steenie," said the appearance of Sir Robert—"Play us up, 'Weel hoddled, Luckie.' "

Now this was a tune my gudesire learned frae a warlock, that heard it when they were worshipping Satan at their meetings; and my gudesire had sometimes played it at the ranting<sup>5</sup> suppers in Redgauntlet Castle, but never very willingly; and now he grew cauld at the very name of it, and said, for excuse, he hadna his pipes wi' him.

"MacCallum, ye limb of Beelzebub," said the fearfu' Sir Robert, "bring Steenie the pipes that I am keeping for him."

MacCallum brought a pair of pipes might have served the piper of Donald of the Isles.<sup>6</sup> But he gave my gudesire a nudge as he offered them; and looking secretly and closely, Steenie saw that the chanter<sup>7</sup> was of steel, and heated to a white heat; so he had fair warning not to trust his fingers with it. So he excused himself again, and said, he was faint and frightened, and had not wind aneugh to fill the bag.

“Then ye maun eat and drink, Steenie,” said the figure; “for we do little else here; and it’s ill speaking between a fou man and a fasting.”<sup>8</sup>

Now these were the very words that the bloody Earl of Douglas said to keep the King’s messenger in hand, while he cut the head off MacLellan of Bombie, at the Threave Castle;<sup>9</sup> and that put Steenie mair and mair on his guard. So he spoke up like a man, and said he came neither to eat, or drink, or make minstrelsy; but simply for his ain—to ken what was come o’ the money he had paid, and to get a discharge for it; and he was so stout-hearted by this time, that he charged Sir Robert for conscience-sake—he had no power to say the holy name—and as he hoped for peace and rest, to spread no snares for him, but just to give him his ain.

The appearance gnashed its teeth and laughed, but it took from a large pocketbook the receipt, and handed it to Steenie. “There is your receipt, ye pitiful cur; and for the money, my dog-whelp of a son may go look for it in the Cat’s Cradle.”

My gudesire uttered mony thanks, and was about to retire, when Sir Robert roared aloud, “Stop though, thou sack-doudling son of a whore! I am not done with thee. HERE we do nothing for nothing; and you must return on this very day twelvemonth, to pay your master the homage that you owe me for my protection.”

My father’s tongue was loosed of a suddenty, and he said aloud, “I refer mysell to God’s pleasure, and not to yours.”

He had no sooner uttered the word than all was dark around him; and he sunk on the earth with such a sudden shock, that he lost both breath and sense.

How lang Steenie lay there, he could not tell; but when he came to himsell, he was lying in the auld kirkyard of Redgauntlet parochine,<sup>1</sup> just at the door of the family aisle, and the scutcheon<sup>2</sup> of the auld knight, Sir Robert, hanging over his head. There was a deep morning fog on the grass and gravestone around him, and his horse was feeding quietly beside the minister’s twa cows. Steenie would have thought the whole was a dream, but he had the receipt in his hand, fairly written and signed by the auld Laird; only the last

letters of his name were a little disorderly, written like one seized with sudden pain.

Sorely troubled in his mind, he left that dreary place, rode through the mist to Redgauntlet Castle, and with much ado he got speech of the Laird.

"Well, you dyvour bankrupt," was the first word, "have you brought me my rent?"

"No," answered my gudesire, "I have not; but I have brought your honour Sir Robert's receipt for it."

"How, sirrah?—Sir Robert's receipt!—You told me he had not given you one."

"Will your honour please to see if that bit line is right?"

Sir John looked at every line, and at every letter, with much attention; and at last, at the date, which my gudesire had not observed,—"*From my appointed place,*" he read, "*this twenty-fifth of November.*—What!—That is yesterday!—Villain, thou must have gone to hell for this!"

"I got it from your honour's father—whether he be in heaven or hell, I know not," said Steenie.

"I will delate<sup>3</sup> you for a warlock to the Privy Council!" said Sir John. "I will send you to your master, the devil, with the help of a tar-barrel and a torch!"

"I intend to delate mysell to the Presbytery,"<sup>4</sup> said Steenie, "and tell them all I have seen last night, whilk are things fitter for them to judge of than a borrel<sup>5</sup> man like me."

Sir John paused, composed himsell, and desired to hear the full history; and my gudesire told it from point to point, as I have told it you—word for word, neither more nor less.

Sir John was silent again for a long time, and at last he said, very composedly, "Steenie, this story of yours concerns the honour of many a noble family besides mine; and if it be a leasing-making,<sup>6</sup> to keep yourself out of my danger, the least you can expect is to have a redhot iron driven through your tongue, and that will be as bad as scauding your fingers with a redhot chanter. But yet it may be true,



Steenie; and if the money cast up, I shall not know what to think of it.—But where shall we find the Cat's Cradle? There are cats enough about the old house, but I think they kitten without the ceremony of bed or cradle."

"We were best ask Hutcheon," said my gudesire; "he kens a' the odd corners about as weel as—another serving-man that is now gane, and that I wad not like to name."

Aweel, Hutcheon, when he was asked, told them, that a ruinous turret, lang disused, next to the clock-house, only accessible by a ladder, for the opening was on the outside, and far above the battlements, was called of old the Cat's Cradle.

"There will I go immediately," said Sir John; and he took (with what purpose, Heaven kens) one of his father's pistols from the hall-table, where they had lain since the night he died, and hastened to the battlements.

It was a dangerous place to climb, for the ladder was auld and frail, and wanted ane or twa rounds. However, up got Sir John, and entered at the turret door, where his body stopped the only little light that was in the bit turret. Something flees at him wi' a vengeance, maist dang him back ower—bang gaed the knight's pistol, and Hutcheon, that held the ladder, and my gudesire that stood beside him, hears a loud skelloch.<sup>7</sup> A minute after, Sir John flings the body of the jackanape down to them, and cries that the siller is fund, and that they should come up and help him. And there was the bag of siller sure aneugh, and mony orra things besides, that had been missing for mony a day. And Sir John, when he had ripped<sup>8</sup> the turret weel, led my gudesire into the dining-parlour, and took him by the hand, and spoke kindly to him, and said he was sorry he should have doubted his word, and that he would hereafter be a good master to him, to make amends.

"And now, Steenie," said Sir John, "although this vision of yours tends, on the whole, to my father's credit, as an honest man, that he should, even after his death, desire to see justice done to a poor man like you, yet you are sensible that ill-dispositioned men might make bad constructions on it, concerning his soul's health. So, I



think, we had better lay the haill dirdum<sup>9</sup> on that ill-deedie creature, Major Weir, and say naething about your dream in the wood of Pitmurkie. You had taken ower muckle brandy to be very certain about ony thing; and, Steenie, this receipt," (his hand shook while he held it out,)—"it's but a queer kind of document, and we will do best, I think, to put it quietly in the fire."

"Od, but for as queer as it is, it's a' the voucher I have for my rent," said my gudesire, who was afraid, it may be, of losing the benefit of Sir Robert's discharge.

"I will bear the contents to your credit in the rental-book, and give you a discharge under my own hand," said Sir John, "and that on the spot. And, Steenie, if you can hold your tongue about this matter, you shall sit, from this term downward, at an easier rent."

"Mony thanks to your honour," said Steenie, who saw easily in what corner the wind was; "doubtless I will be conformable to all your honour's commands; only I would willingly speak wi' some powerful minister on the subject, for I do not like the sort of soumons of appointment whilk your honour's father"—

"Do not call that phantom my father!" said Sir John, interrupting him.

"Weel, then, the thing that was so like him,"—said my gudesire; "he spoke of my coming back to him this time twelvemonth, and it's a weight on my conscience."

"Aweel, then," said Sir John, "if you be much distressed in mind, you may speak to our minister of the parish; he is a douce<sup>1</sup> man, regards the honour of our family, and the mair that he may look for some patronage from me."

Wi' that my gudesire readily agreed that the receipt should be burnt, and the Laird threw it into the chimney with his ain hand. Burn it would not for them, though; but away it flew up the lum,<sup>2</sup> wi' a lang train of sparks at its tail, and a hissing noise like a squib.<sup>3</sup>

My gudesire gaed down to the manse,<sup>4</sup> and the minister, when he had heard the story, said, it was his real opinion, that though my gudesire had gaen very far in tampering with such dangerous

matters, yet, as he had refused the devil's arles<sup>5</sup> (for such was the offer of meat and drink,) and had refused to do homage by piping at his bidding, he hoped, that if he held a circumspect walk hereafter, Satan could take little advantage by what was come and gane. And, indeed, my gudesire, of his ain accord, lang forswore baith the pipes and the brandy—it was not even till the year was out, and the fatal day passed, that he would so much as take the fiddle, or drink usquebaugh or tippeny.<sup>6</sup>

Sir John made up his story about the jackanape as he liked himsell; and some believe till this day there was no more in the matter than the filching nature of the brute. Indeed, ye'll no hinder some to threap,<sup>7</sup> that it was nane o' the Auld Enemy that Dougal and my gudesire saw in the Laird's room, but only that wanchancy creature, the Major, capering on the coffin; and that as to the blawing on the Laird's whistle that was heard after he was dead, the filthy brute could do that as weel as the Laird himsell, if no better. But Heaven kens the truth, whilk first came out by the minister's wife, after Sir John and her ain gudeman<sup>8</sup> were baith in the moulds.<sup>9</sup> And then, my gudesire, wha was failed in his limbs, but not in his judgment or memory—at least nothing to speak of—was obliged to tell the real narrative to his freends, for the credit of his good name. He might else have been charged for a warlock.

The shades of evening were growing thicker around us as my conductor finished his long narrative with this moral—"Ye see, birkie,<sup>1</sup> it is nae chancy thing to tak a stranger traveller for a guide, when ye are in an uncouth<sup>2</sup> land."

1824

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Must. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Years of famine at the end of the 1690s. “Of that Ilk”: from the estate that bears the same name as the family. Willie’s story concerns Redgauntlet of Redgauntlet.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Such.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4:  
This opening establishes Redgauntlet’s past as a “prelatist”—supporter of what was, for most of the 17th century, Scotland’s established, Episcopal Church—and a royalist. For four decades he was the foe of the Covenanters—Presbyterians, often members of Scotland’s middle and lower classes, who rejected episcopacy, the spiritual authority of the bishops, and supported “covenants” to preserve the purity of their worship. The conflict between the royalists and Covenanters began during the Civil Wars of the 1640s, when, on behalf of Charles I, the Earl of Montrose and his Highland army battled the Presbyterian insurgents—known as the [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Know.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Always.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Royalist aristocrats who led the persecutions of Covenanters in 1681–85. Folk legends held that both had diabolical powers, which Scott transfers to Redgauntlet in the following paragraph.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A word for river valley, perhaps of Scott’s coining.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Much.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: To take the Test is, according to the terms of the Test Act of 1681, to swear an oath recognizing the monarch’s supremacy as head of the Church, something a Presbyterian, who recognized Christ alone as head, could not do. Redgauntlet and followers used this legal device to hunt down “recusants,” that is, those who did not conform to the Episcopal Church.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Redgauntlet's supernaturally fleet-footed mare could turn a hare— get in front of it and change its course—while being ridden on Carrifragawns, a steep slope.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Bestowed.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "Devil take Redgauntlet!"[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Grandfather.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Period of Border warfare in the 16th century.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Cooler.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Beside the point.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Lad.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Thumbhole in the melody pipe of a bagpipe. The border between Scotland and England extends between Carlisle—chief city of the northern English county of Cumberland (now known as Cumbria) on the west coast and Berwick on the east.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Tory Party in Scotland included most supporters of the Episcopal Church and, after 1688, the Jacobites—supporters of the exiled James Stuart and his heirs.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Guarding.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Gave.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Revolution of 1688, which expelled the Stuart dynasty from the British throne, and in Scotland reestablished Presbyterianism, ending the persecutions of the Covenanters. Jacobites continued to resist the Revolutionary Settlement until their last uprising in 1745.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Extraordinary crowing; that is, much noise.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Except.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Were obliged to be.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: To move house. Rents were due on "quarter days": Candlemas (February 2), Whitsunday (May 15), Lammas (August 1), and Martinmas (November 11).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Difficult work.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Whole.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Fox.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Lots of property.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, in this post-Revolutionary world puritanical Laurie adheres to (“professes”) his religion but still likes an occasional (“orra”) worldly song (“sough”).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Above all.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the security for the loan of the rent money is “the stocking”—cattle, farm implements, etc.—of Steenie’s farm.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Monkey.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Major Weir, a historical figure who fought in the Covenanter cause in youth and in old age confessed to crimes that included wizardry, for which he was executed in 1670.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Gentlemen in the late 17th and the 18th centuries were in the custom of wearing wigs in public.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Grimaced.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Ugly.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: News.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Obscene songs.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Rents.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, he bowed.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Cup.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Made.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Sir John is eventually to hold a seat in the Scots Parliament that will make history in 1707 by passing the Act of Union that joins the kingdoms of England and Scotland and by this means voting itself out of existence. Like many of his peers, Sir John will take a cut (“rug”) of the “compensations” offered the parliamentarians as a bribe.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wept.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Always looked worse and worse.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Best bedroom.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Keep quiet.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Fellows.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Cup.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A selection: Lindsay was a 16th-century satirical poet.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Tilted.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Once and always—that is, forever.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Parapet atop a castle.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Ghostly occurrences.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Mourning dress included hat bands of white linen (“weepers”) and a “hanging cravat” instead of the usual shirt frills.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A ceremonious speech wishing Sir John well in his new position as head of a great family: white bread (“white loaf”) is mentioned as a delicacy only the rich could afford; a “braid lairdship” is a large estate.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Slippers.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the deceased has left behind him a confused state of affairs that requires disentangling (winding). “Hesp”: length of yarn.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The property survey of England ordered by William the Conqueror in 1086.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Behind in paying.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Of some kind (Latin); a legal term used for evidence that is acceptable only under special circumstances.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Every.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Young woman.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Annoyance.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Mind.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Good-for-nothing.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Unlucky.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Made people’s flesh creep.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, “I am told she was called Tibbie Faw.” “Ostler-wife”: female keeper of a hostelry (inn).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Home.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Honest.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Much maligned.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Extend credit for a long time.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Great folding gates.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Disorderly revelry.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Easter and Christmas.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Nickname for an idler.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Trouble.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Pouring.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Willie's list identifies a number of the royalist aristocrats who, while alive, took the lead in persecuting the Covenanters.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: John Graham of Claverhouse, another historical figure notorious for his ruthlessness during the killing years and the leader of the Highland army that fought for the cause of the exiled King James Stuart in 1689. He died in battle that year, and legend reported that it took a silver bullet to kill him.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The "Highland host" sent into southwest Scotland in 1678 to enforce a law that legalized the evictions of people who attended Presbyterian conventicles rather than parish churches. Covenanter hymns compared this army to the Amorites, who in the Old Testament are the enemies of the Israelites.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Merry.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A powerful chief of the Western Isles of Scotland.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Melody pipe of a bagpipe.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Proverb: a full man should not prevent a hungry man from eating.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In 1452 the Earl of Douglas beheaded his prisoner MacLellan while the king's messenger bearing orders for his release was detained at the table refreshing himself after his journey.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Churchyard of Redgauntlet parish.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Coat of arms.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Report.[Return to reference 3](#)



- Note 4: Ecclesiastical court made up of ministers and elders from the local parishes.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Simple.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Slander.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Screech.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Searched.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Blame.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Respectable.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Chimney flue.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Firecracker.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Minister's house.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Money given to bind the bargain when a servant is hired.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Whiskey and weak beer that was sold for two pence. See Burns's "Tam O'Shanter," lines 107–08; Steenie's adventure in some respects repeats Tam's.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Contend.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Husband.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Their graves.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Clever young man.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Strange.[Return to reference 2](#)



# **SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE**

## **1772–1834**

In *The Prelude* Wordsworth, recording his gratitude to the mountains, lakes, and winds “that dwell among the hills where I was born,” commiserates with Coleridge because “thou, my Friend! wert reared / In the great City, ‘mid far other scenes.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge had in fact been born in the small town of Ottery St. Mary, in rural Devonshire, but on the death of his father he had been sent to school at Christ’s Hospital in London. He was a dreamy, enthusiastic, and extraordinarily precocious schoolboy. Charles Lamb, his schoolmate and lifelong friend, in an essay on Christ’s Hospital gave a vivid sketch of Coleridge’s loneliness, his learning, and his eloquence. When in 1791 Coleridge entered Jesus College, Cambridge, he was an accomplished scholar; but he found little intellectual stimulation at the university, fell into idleness, dissoluteness, and debt, then in despair fled to London and enlisted in the Light Dragoons under the alias of Silas Tomkyn Comberbach —one of the most inept cavalrymen in the long history of the British army. Although rescued by his brothers and sent back to Cambridge, he left the university in 1794 without a degree.

In June 1794 Coleridge met Robert Southey, then a student at Oxford who, like himself, had poetic aspirations, was a radical in religion and politics, and sympathized with the republican experiment in France. Together the two young men planned to establish an ideal democratic community in America for which

Coleridge coined the name "Pantisocracy," signifying an equal rule by all. A plausible American real estate agent persuaded them that the ideal location would be on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. Twelve men undertook to go; and because perpetuation of the scheme required offspring, hence wives, Coleridge dutifully became engaged to Sara Fricker, conveniently at hand as the sister of Southey's fiancée. The Pantisocracy scheme collapsed, but at Southey's insistence Coleridge went through with the marriage, "resolved," as he said, "but wretched." Later Coleridge's radicalism waned, and he became a conservative in politics—a highly philosophical one—and a staunch Anglican in religion.

In 1795 Coleridge met Wordsworth and at once judged him to be "the best poet of the age." When in 1797 Wordsworth brought his sister, Dorothy, to settle at Alfoxden, only three miles from the Coleridges at Nether Stowey, the period of intimate communication and poetic collaboration began that was the golden time of Coleridge's life. An annual allowance of £150, granted to Coleridge by Thomas and Josiah Wedgwood, sons of the founder of the famous pottery firm, came just in time to deflect him from assuming a post as a Unitarian minister. After their joint publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, Coleridge and the Wordsworths spent a winter in Germany, where Coleridge attended the University of Göttingen and began the lifelong study of German philosophers and critics—Kant, Schiller, Schelling, and Fichte—that helped alter profoundly his thinking about philosophy, religion, and aesthetics.

Back in England, Coleridge in 1800 followed the Wordsworths to the Lake District, settling at Greta Hall, Keswick. He had become gradually disaffected from his wife, and now he fell helplessly and hopelessly in love with Sara Hutchinson, whose sister, Mary, Wordsworth married in 1802. In accord with the medical prescription of that time, Coleridge had been taking laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol) to ease the painful physical ailments from which he had suffered from an early age. In 1800–01 heavy dosages during attacks of rheumatism made opium a necessity to him, and

Coleridge soon recognized that the drug was a greater evil than the diseases it did not cure. "Dejection: An Ode," published in 1802, was Coleridge's despairing farewell to health, happiness, and poetic creativity. A two-year sojourn on the Mediterranean island of Malta, intended to restore his health, instead completed his decline. When he returned to England in the late summer of 1806, he was a broken man, a drug addict, estranged from his wife, suffering from agonies of remorse, and subject to terrifying nightmares of guilt and despair from which his own shrieks awakened him. By 1810, when he and Wordsworth quarreled bitterly, it must have seemed that he could not fall any lower.

Under these conditions Coleridge's literary efforts, however sporadic and fragmentary, were little short of heroic. In 1808 he debuted as a speaker at one of the new lecturing institutions that sprang up in British cities in the early nineteenth century. His lectures on poetry, like his later series on Shakespeare, became part of the social calendar for fashionable Londoners—women, excluded still from universities, particularly. He wrote for newspapers and single-handedly undertook to write, publish, and distribute a periodical, *The Friend*, which lasted for some ten months beginning in June 1809. A tragedy, *Remorse*, had in 1813 a successful run of twenty performances at the Drury Lane theater. In 1816 he took up residence at Highgate, a northern suburb of London, under the supervision of the excellent and endlessly forbearing physician James Gillman, who managed to control, although not to eliminate, Coleridge's consumption of opium. The next three years were Coleridge's most sustained period of literary activity. While continuing to lecture and to write for the newspapers on a variety of subjects, he published *Biographia Literaria*, *Zapolya* (a drama), a book consisting of the essays in *The Friend* (revised and greatly enlarged), two collections of poems, and several important treatises on philosophical and religious subjects. In these treatises and those that followed over the next fifteen years, he emerged as the heir to the conservatism of Edmund Burke, an opponent to secularism and a defender of the Anglican Church, and an unapologetic intellectual

elitist with an ambitious account of the role elites might play in modern states, outlined in his discussions of national culture and of the “clerisy” who would take responsibility for preserving it.

The remaining years of his life, which he spent with Dr. and Mrs. Gillman, were quieter and happier than any he had known since the turn of the century. He came to a peaceful understanding with his wife and was reconciled with Wordsworth, with whom he toured the Rhineland in 1828. His rooms at Highgate became a center for friends, for the London literati, and for a steady stream of pilgrims from England and America. They came to hear one of the wonders of the age, the Sage of Highgate’s conversation—or monologue—for even in his decline, Coleridge’s talk never lost its almost hypnotic power. Mary Shelley appears to have been haunted by the memory of the evening when, a small child, she hid behind a sofa to listen to Coleridge, one of her father’s visitors, recite *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and a stanza from that poem of dark mystery found its way into *Frankenstein*, just as her recollections of that visitor’s voice contributed to her depictions of the irresistible hold her novel’s storytellers have over their auditors. When he died, Coleridge left his friends with the sense that an incomparable intellect had vanished from the world.

Coleridge’s friends, however, abetted by his own merciless self-judgments, set current the opinion, still common, that he was great in promise but not in performance. Even in his buoyant youth he described his own character as “indolence capable of energies”; and it is true that while his mind was incessantly active and fertile, he lacked application and staying power. He also manifested early in life a profound sense of guilt and a need for public expiation. After drug addiction sapped his strength and will, he often adapted (or simply adopted) passages from other writers, with little or no acknowledgment, and sometimes in a context that seems designed to reveal that he relies on sources that he does not credit. Whatever the tangled motives for his procedure, Coleridge has repeatedly been charged with gross plagiarism, from his day to ours. After *The Ancient Mariner*, most of the poems he completed were written, like

the first version of “Dejection: An Ode,” in a spasm of intense effort. Writings that required sustained planning and application were either left unfinished or, like *Biographia Literaria*, made up of brilliant sections padded out with filler, sometimes lifted from other writers, in a desperate effort to meet a deadline. Many of his speculations Coleridge merely confided to his notebooks and the ears of his friends, incorporated in letters, and poured out in the margins of his own and other people’s books.

Even so, it is only when measured against his own potentialities that Coleridge’s achievements appear limited. In an 1838 essay the philosopher John Stuart Mill hailed the recently deceased Coleridge as one of “the two great seminal minds of England”: according to Mill, Coleridge’s conservatism had, along with the very different utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham (the other seminal mind identified in Mill’s essay), revolutionized the political thought of the day. Coleridge was also one of the important and influential literary theorists of the nineteenth century. One of his major legacies is the notion that culture, the nation’s artistic and spiritual heritage, represents a force with the power to combat the fragmentation of a modern, market-driven society and to restore a common, collective life. This was an idea that he worked out largely in opposition to Bentham’s utilitarianism, the newly prestigious discipline of political economy, and the impoverished, soulless account of human nature that these systems of thought offered. And in *Biographia Literaria* and elsewhere, Coleridge raised the stakes for literary criticism, making it into a kind of writing that could address the most difficult and abstract questions—questions about, for instance, the relations between literary language and ordinary language, or between poetry and philosophy, or between perception and imagination. Above all, Coleridge’s writings in verse—whether we consider the poetry of Gothic demonism in *Christabel* or the meditative conversation poems like “Frost at Midnight” or “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”—are the achievements of a remarkably innovative poet.

# The Eolian Harp<sup>1</sup>

*Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire*

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined  
Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is  
To sit beside our cot, our cot o'ergrown  
With white flowered jasmin, and the broad-leaved  
myrtle,  
5 (Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)  
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,  
Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve  
Serenely brilliant (such should wisdom be)  
Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents  
10 Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world so  
hushed!  
The stilly murmur of the distant sea  
Tells us of silence.

And that simplest lute,  
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!  
How by the desultory breeze caressed,  
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,  
15 It pours such sweet upbraiding,<sup>o</sup> as must needs  
Tempt to repeat the wrong! And now, its strings  
Boldlier swept, the long sequacious<sup>o</sup> notes  
Over delicious surges sink and rise,  
Such a soft floating witchery of sound  
20 As twilight Elfin's make, when they at eve  
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,  
Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,  
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,<sup>2</sup>

25 Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!  
O the one life within us and abroad,  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,  
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance<sup>3</sup> every where—  
Methinks, it should have been impossible  
30 Not to love all things in a world so filled;  
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air  
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.

And thus, my love! as on the midway slope  
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,  
35 Whilst through my half-closed eye-lids I behold  
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,<sup>o</sup>  
And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;  
Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,  
And many idle flitting phantasies,  
40 Traverse my indolent and passive brain,  
As wild and various as the random gales  
That swell and flutter on this subject lute!

And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic harps diversely framed,  
45 That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of All?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof  
Darts, O beloved woman! nor such thoughts  
50 Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,  
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.  
Meek daughter in the family of Christ!  
Well hast thou said and holily dispraised  
These shapings of the unregenerate<sup>4</sup> mind;  
55 Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break  
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling<sup>o</sup> spring.

60 For never guiltless may I speak of him,  
 The Incomprehensible! save when with awe  
 I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels;  
 Who with his saving mercies healed me,  
 A sinful and most miserable man,  
 Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess  
 Peace, and this cot, and thee, heart-honored Maid!

1795

1796

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
 Named for Aeolus, god of the winds, the harp has strings stretched over a rectangular sounding box. When placed in an opened window, the harp (also called “Eolian lute,” “Eolian lyre,” “wind harp”) responds to the altering wind by sequences of musical chords. This instrument, which seems to voice nature’s own music, was a favorite household furnishing in the period and was repeatedly alluded to in Romantic poetry. It served also as one of the recurrent Romantic images for the mind—either the mind in poetic inspiration, as in the last stanzas of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (p. 804, below), or else the mind in perception, responding to an intellectual breeze by trembling into consciousness, as in this poem, lines 44–48.

Coleridge wrote this poem to Sara Fricker, whom he married on October 4, 1795, and took to a cottage (the “cot” of lines 3 and 64) at Clevedon, overlooking the Bristol Channel. He later several times expanded and altered the original version; the famous lines 26–29, for example, were not added until 1817. Originally it was titled “Effusion XXXV” and was one of thirty-six such effusions that Coleridge included in a 1796 volume of verse; revised and retitled, it became what he called a “conversation poem”—the designation used since his day for a sustained blank-verse lyric of description and meditation, in the mode of conversation addressed to a silent auditor. This was the



form that Coleridge perfected in "Frost at Midnight" and that Wordsworth adopted in "Tintern Abbey."

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Brilliantly colored birds found in New Guinea and adjacent islands. The native practice of removing the legs when preparing the skin led Europeans to believe that the birds were footless and spent their lives hovering in the air and feeding on nectar.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An archaic term for enjoyment, coined in the 16th century by Spenser and reintroduced by Coleridge.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Spiritually unredeemed; not born again.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *scolding*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *regularly following*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ocean*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ever babbling*[Return to reference °](#)

## This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison

In the June of 1797, some long-expected Friends paid a visit to the author's cottage; and on the morning of their arrival, he met with an accident, which disabled him from walking during the whole time of their stay. One evening, when they had left him for a few hours, he composed the following lines in the garden-bower.<sup>1</sup>

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,  
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost  
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been  
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age  
Had dimmed mine eyes to blindness! They,  
5       meanwhile,  
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,  
On springy<sup>2</sup> heath, along the hill-top edge,  
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,  
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;  
The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,  
10       And only speckled by the mid-day sun;  
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock  
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,  
Unsunned and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves  
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,  
15       Fanned by the water-fall! and there my friends  
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,  
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)  
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge  
Of the blue clay-stone.<sup>3</sup>

Now, my friends emerge

Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again  
20 The many-steepled tract magnificent  
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,  
With some fair bark,<sup>3</sup> perhaps, whose sails light up  
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles  
25 Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on  
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,  
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined  
And hungered after Nature, many a year,  
In the great City pent,<sup>4</sup> winning thy way  
30 With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain  
And strange calamity!<sup>5</sup> Ah! slowly sink  
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious sun!  
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,  
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!  
35 Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!  
And kindle, thou blue ocean! So my Friend  
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,  
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round  
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem  
40 Less gross than bodily; and of such hues  
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes  
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight  
Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad  
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,  
45 This little lime-tree bower, have I not marked  
Much that has soothed me. Pale beneath the blaze  
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watched  
Some broad and sunny leaf, and loved to see  
The shadow of the leaf and stem above  
50 Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree  
Was richly tinged, and a deep radiance lay  
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps

Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass  
 Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue  
 55 Through the late twilight: and though now the bat  
 Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,  
 Yet still the solitary humble bee  
 Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know  
 That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;  
 60 No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,  
 No waste so vacant, but may well employ  
 Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart  
 Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes  
 'Tis well to be bereft of promised good,  
 65 That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate  
 With lively joy the joys we cannot share.  
 My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook  
 Beat its straight path along the dusky air  
 Homewards, I blessed it! deeming its black wing  
 70 (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)  
 Had crossed the mighty orb's dilated glory,  
 While thou stood'st gazing; or when all was still,  
 Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm  
 For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom  
 75 No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

1797

1800

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The time was in fact July 1797. The visiting friends were William and Dorothy Wordsworth and Charles Lamb. The accident was the fault of Mrs. Coleridge—"dear Sara," Coleridge wrote, "accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot." The bower consisted of lime (linden) trees in the garden of Thomas Poole, next door to Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey. Coleridge related these facts in a letter to Robert Southey, July 17, 1797, in which he transcribed the first version of this poem. In the earliest printed text the title is followed by

“Addressed to Charles Lamb, of the India-House,  
London.”[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: *Elastic*, I mean [*Coleridge's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Compare Dorothy Wordsworth's description of the “low damp dell” in her *Alfoxden Journal*, February 10, 1798 (p. 436, above).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Despite Coleridge's claim, Charles Lamb eminently preferred London over what he called “dead Nature.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Some ten months earlier Charles Lamb's sister, Mary, had stabbed their mother to death in a fit of insanity.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *boat*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Rime of the Ancient Mariner<sup>1</sup>

## IN SEVEN PARTS

*Facile credo, plures esse Naturas invisibiles quam visibiles in rerum universitate. Sed horum [sic] omnium familiam quis nobis enarrabit, et gradus et cognationes et discrimina et singulorum munera? Quid agunt? quae loca habitant? Harum rerum notitiam semper ambivit ingenium humanum, nunquam attigit. Juvat, interea, non diffiteor, quandoque in animo, tanquam in tabulâ, majoris et melioris mundi imaginem contemplari: ne mens assuefacta hodiernae vitae minutiis se contrahat nimis, et tota subsidat in pusillas cogitationes. Sed veritati interea invigilandum est, modusque servandus, ut certa ab incertis, diem a nocte, distinguamus.*

—T. BURNET, *Archaeol. Phil.* p. 68.<sup>2</sup>

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Coleridge describes the origin of this poem in the opening section of chap. 14 of *Biographia Literaria*. In a comment made to the Reverend Alexander Dyce in 1835 and in a note on “We Are Seven” dictated in 1843, Wordsworth added some details. The poem, based on a dream of Coleridge’s friend Cruikshank, was originally planned as a collaboration between Coleridge and Wordsworth, to pay the expense of a walking tour they took with Dorothy Wordsworth in November 1797. Before he dropped out of the enterprise, Wordsworth suggested the shooting of th

albatross and the navigation of the ship by the dead men; he also contributed lines 13–16 and 226–27.

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: "I readily believe that there are more invisible than visible Natures in the universe. But who will explain for us the family of all these beings, and the ranks and relations and distinguishing features and functions of each? What do they do? What places do they inhabit? The human mind has always sought the knowledge of these things, but never attained it. Meanwhile I do not deny that it is helpful sometimes to contemplate in the mind, as on a tablet, the image of a greater, and better world, lest the intellect, habituated to the petty things of daily life, narrow itself and sink wholly into trivial thoughts. But at the same time we must be watchful for the truth and keep a sense of proportion, so that we may distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night." Adapted by Coleridge from Thomas Burnet, *Archaeologiae Philosophicae* (1692). [Return to reference 2](#)

## **Part 1**

It is an ancient Mariner  
And he stoppeth one of three.  
"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,  
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"

5 The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,  
And I am next of kin;  
The guests are met, the feast is set:  
May'st hear the merry din."

He holds him with his skinny hand,  
"There was a ship," quoth he.  
10 "Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!"  
Eftsoons<sup>3</sup> his hand dropt he.

He holds him with his glittering eye—  
The wedding-guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years' child:  
15 The Mariner hath his will.<sup>4</sup>

The wedding-guest sat on a stone:  
He cannot choose but hear;  
And thus spake on that ancient man,  
The bright-eyed Mariner.  
20

"The ship was cheered, the harbor cleared,  
Merrily did we drop  
Below the kirk,<sup>5</sup> below the hill,  
Below the light house top.

25 The sun came up upon the left,  
Out of the sea came he!  
And he shone bright, and on the right  
Went down into the sea.

Higher and higher every day,  
Till over the mast at noon—" "  
30 The wedding-guest here beat his breast,  
For he heard the loud bassoon.

The bride hath paced into the hall,  
Red as a rose is she;  
Nodding their heads before her goes  
35 The merry minstrelsy.

The wedding-guest he beat his breast,  
Yet he cannot choose but hear;  
And thus spake on that ancient man,  
The bright-eyed Mariner.  
40

"And now the storm-blast came, and he



Was tyrannous and strong:  
 He struck with his o'ertaking wings,  
 And chased us south along.

45 With sloping masts and dipping prow,  
 As who pursued with yell and blow  
 Still treads the shadow of his foe,  
 And forward bends his head,  
 The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,  
 And southward aye<sup>6</sup> we fled.

50 And now there came both mist and snow,  
 And it grew wondrous cold:  
 And ice, mast-high, came floating by,  
 As green as emerald.

55 And through the drifts the snowy clifts  
 Did send a dismal sheen:  
 Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken<sup>7</sup>—  
 The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,  
 The ice was all around:  
 60 It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,  
 Like noises in a swound!<sup>8</sup>

At length did cross an Albatross,  
 Thorough the fog it came;  
 As if it had been a Christian soul,  
 65 We hailed it in God's name.

It ate the food it ne'er had eat,  
 And round and round it flew.  
 The ice did split with a thunder-fit;  
 The helmsman steered us through!  
 70 And a good south wind sprung up behind;  
 The Albatross did follow,  
 And every day, for food or play,  
 Came to the mariners' hollo!

75 In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,<sup>9</sup>  
 It perched for vespers nine;  
 Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,  
 Glimmered the white moon-shine."

"God save thee, ancient Mariner!  
 From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—  
 80 Why look'st thou so?"—With my cross-bow  
 I shot the Albatross.

## Endnotes

- Note 3: At once.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, the Mariner has gained control of the will of the wedding guest by hypnosis or, as it was called in Coleridge's time, by "mesmerism."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Church.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Always.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Knew.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Swoon.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Rope supporting the mast.[Return to reference 9](#)

## **Part 2**

The Sun now rose upon the right:<sup>1</sup>  
Out of the sea came he,  
Still hid in mist, and on the left  
85 Went down into the sea.

And the good south wind still blew behind,  
But no sweet bird did follow,  
Nor any day for food or play  
90 Came to the mariners' hollo!

And I had done a hellish thing,  
And it would work 'em woe:  
For all averred, I had killed the bird  
That made the breeze to blow.  
95 Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,  
That made the breeze to blow!

Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,  
The glorious Sun uprist:  
Then all averred, I had killed the bird  
That brought the fog and mist.  
100 'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,  
That bring the fog and mist.

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
The furrow followed free;<sup>2</sup>  
105 We were the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea.

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,  
'Twas sad as sad could be;  
And we did speak only to break  
110 The silence of the sea!

All in a hot and copper sky,  
The bloody Sun, at noon,  
Right up above the mast did stand,  
No bigger than the Moon.

115 Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.

120 Water, water, every where,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, every where,  
Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!  
That ever this should be!

125      Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs  
             Upon the slimy sea.

            About, about, in reel and rout  
             The death-fires<sup>4</sup> danced at night;  
             The water, like a witch's oils,  
 130      Burnt green, and blue and white.

            And some in dreams assured were  
             Of the spirit that plagued us so;  
             Nine fathom deep he had followed us  
             From the land of mist and snow.

135      And every tongue, through utter drought,  
             Was withered at the root;  
             We could not speak, no more than if  
             We had been choked with soot.

            Ah! well-a-day! what evil looks  
 140      Had I from old and young!  
             Instead of the cross, the Albatross  
             About my neck was hung.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Having rounded Cape Horn, the ship heads north into the Pacific. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 3: In 1817 Coleridge wrote of this line, "I had not been long on board a ship, before I perceived that this was the image as seen by a spectator from the shore, or from another vessel. From the ship itself, the *Wake* appears like a brook flowing off from the stern." To better capture the Mariner's vision, he altered the line to "The furrow stream'd off free." Later editions reverted to the original words, as printed here. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 2: That is, the equator. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 4: Usually glossed as St. Elmo's fire—an atmospheric electricity on a ship's mast or rigging—believed by superstitious sailors to portend disaster. Possibly the reference is instead to phosphorescence resulting from the decomposition of organic matter in the sea (see line 123). [Return to reference 4](#)

### **Part 3**

There passed a weary time. Each throat  
Was parched, and glazed each eye.  
A weary time! a weary time!  
145 How glazed each weary eye,  
When looking westward, I beheld  
A something in the sky.

At first it seemed a little speck,  
And then it seemed a mist;  
150 It moved and moved, and took at last  
A certain shape, I wist.<sup>5</sup>

A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!  
And still it neared and neared:  
As if it dodged a water-sprite,<sup>6</sup>  
155 It plunged and tacked and veered.

With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,  
We could nor laugh nor wail;  
Through utter drought all dumb we stood!  
I bit my arm, I sucked the blood,  
160 And cried, A sail! a sail!

With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,  
Agape they heard me call:  
Gramercy!<sup>7</sup> they for joy did grin,  
And all at once their breath drew in,  
165 As they were drinking all.

See! see! (I cried) she tacks no more!  
Hither to work us weal;<sup>8</sup>  
Without a breeze, without a tide,  
She steadies with upright keel!

170 The western wave was all a-flame.  
The day was well nigh done!  
Almost upon the western wave  
Rested the broad bright Sun;  
When that strange shape drove suddenly  
175 Betwixt us and the Sun.

And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,  
(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)  
As if through a dungeon-grate he peered  
With broad and burning face.

180 Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)  
How fast she nears and nears!  
Are those her sails that glance in the Sun,  
Like restless gossameres?<sup>9</sup>

185 Are those her ribs through which the Sun  
 Did peer, as through a grate?  
 And is that Woman all her crew?  
 Is that a Death? and are there two?  
 Is Death that woman's mate?

190 Her lips were red, her looks were free,  
 Her locks were yellow as gold:  
 Her skin was as white as leprosy,  
 The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,  
 Who thicks man's blood with cold.

195 The naked hulk<sup>1</sup> alongside came,  
 And the twain were casting dice;  
 "The game is done! I've won! I've won!"  
 Quoth she, and whistles thrice.

200 The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:  
 At one stride comes the dark;  
 With far-heard whisper, o'er the sea,  
 Off shot the spectre-bark.<sup>2</sup>

205 We listened and looked sideways up!  
 Fear at my heart, as at a cup,  
 My life-blood seemed to sip!  
 The stars were dim, and thick the night,  
 The steersman's face by his lamp gleamed white;  
 From the sails the dew did drip—  
 Till clomb above the eastern bar  
 The horned Moon, with one bright star  
 210 Within the nether tip.<sup>3</sup>

215 One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,  
 Too quick for groan or sigh,  
 Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,  
 And cursed me with his eye.

Four times fifty living men,  
 (And I heard nor sigh nor groan)  
 With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,  
 They dropped down one by one.

220 The souls did from their bodies fly,—  
 They fled to bliss or woe!  
 And every soul, it passed me by,  
 Like the whizz of my cross-bow!

## Endnotes

- Note 5: Knew.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A supernatural being that supervises the natural elements (but Coleridge may in fact have been using the term to mean water-spout).[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Great thanks; from the French *grand-merci*.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Benefit.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Filmy cobwebs floating in the air.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Large ship.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Ghost ship.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An omen of impending evil.[Return to reference 3](#)

#### **Part 4**

225 "I fear thee, ancient Mariner!  
I fear thy skinny hand!  
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,  
As is the ribbed sea-sand.

I fear thee and thy glittering eye,  
And thy skinny hand, so brown."—  
230 Fear not, fear not, thou wedding-guest!  
This body dropt not down.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
235 My soul in agony.

The many men, so beautiful!  
And they all dead did lie:  
And a thousand thousand slimy things  
Lived on; and so did I.

240 I looked upon the rotting sea,  
And drew my eyes away;  
I looked upon the rotting deck,  
And there the dead men lay.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;  
But or ever a prayer had gusht,  
245 A wicked whisper came, and made  
My heart as dry as dust.

I closed my lids, and kept them close,  
And the balls like pulses beat;  
250 For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky  
Lay like a load on my weary eye,  
And the dead were at my feet.

The cold sweat melted from their limbs,  
Nor rot nor reek did they:  
255 The look with which they looked on me  
Had never passed away.

An orphan's curse would drag to hell  
A spirit from on high;  
But oh! more horrible than that  
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!  
260 Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,  
And yet I could not die.

The moving Moon went up the sky,  
And no where did abide:  
Softly she was going up,



265 And a star or two beside—  
Her beams bemocked the sultry main,  
Like April hoar-frost spread;  
But where the ship's huge shadow lay,  
270 The charmed water burnt alway  
A still and awful red.

Beyond the shadow of the ship,  
I watched the water-snakes:  
They moved in tracks of shining white,  
And when they reared, the elfish light  
275 Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
280 They coiled and swam; and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
285 Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And I blessed them unaware.

The selfsame moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
290 The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea.

## **Part 5**

Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing,  
Beloved from pole to pole!  
To Mary Queen the praise be given!  
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,  
295 That slid into my soul.

The silly<sup>4</sup> buckets on the deck,  
That had so long remained,  
I dreamt that they were filled with dew;  
300 And when I awoke, it rained.

My lips were wet, my throat was cold,  
My garments all were dank;  
Sure I had drunken in my dreams,  
And still my body drank.

I moved, and could not feel my limbs:  
305 I was so light—almost  
I thought that I had died in sleep,  
And was a blessed ghost.

And soon I heard a roaring wind:  
It did not come anear;  
310 But with its sound it shook the sails,  
That were so thin and sere.

The upper air burst into life!  
And a hundred fire-flags sheen,<sup>5</sup>  
To and fro they were hurried about!  
315 And to and fro, and in and out,  
The wan stars danced between.

And the coming wind did roar more loud,  
And the sails did sigh like sedge;<sup>6</sup>  
320 And the rain poured down from one black cloud;  
The Moon was at its edge.

The thick black cloud was cleft, and still  
The Moon was at its side:  
Like waters shot from some high crag,  
325 The lightning fell with never a jag,  
A river steep and wide.

The loud wind never reached the ship,  
Yet now the ship moved on!  
Beneath the lightning and the moon  
330 The dead men gave a groan.

They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,  
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;  
It had been strange, even in a dream,

To have seen those dead men rise.

335 The helmsman steered, the ship moved on;  
Yet never a breeze up blew;  
The mariners all 'gan work the ropes,  
Where they were wont to do;  
They raised their limbs like lifeless tools—  
340 We were a ghastly crew.

The body of my brother's son  
Stood by me, knee to knee:  
The body and I pulled at one rope,  
But he said nought to me.

345 "I fear thee, ancient Mariner!"  
Be calm, thou Wedding-Guest!  
'Twas not those souls that fled in pain,  
Which to their corses<sup>8</sup> came again,  
But a troop of spirits blest:

350 For when it dawned—they dropped their arms,  
And clustered round the mast;  
Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths,  
And from their bodies passed.

Around, around, flew each sweet sound,  
Then darted to the Sun;  
355 Slowly the sounds came back again,  
Now mixed, now one by one.

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky  
I heard the sky-lark sing;  
Sometimes all little birds that are,  
360 How they seemed to fill the sea and air  
With their sweet jargoning!<sup>9</sup>

And now 'twas like all instruments,  
Now like a lonely flute;  
365 And now it is an angel's song,  
That makes the heavens be mute.

It ceased; yet still the sails made on  
A pleasant noise till noon,  
A noise like of a hidden brook  
370 In the leafy month of June,  
That to the sleeping woods all night  
Singeth a quiet tune.

Till noon we quietly sailed on,  
Yet never a breeze did breathe:  
375 Slowly and smoothly went the ship,  
Moved onward from beneath.

Under the keel nine fathom deep,

From the land of mist and snow,  
 The spirit slid: and it was he  
 That made the ship to go.  
 380 The sails at noon left off their tune,  
 And the ship stood still also.

The Sun, right up above the mast,  
 Had fixed her to the ocean:  
 But in a minute she 'gan stir,  
 385 With a short uneasy motion—  
 Backwards and forwards half her length  
 With a short uneasy motion.

Then like a pawing horse let go,  
 She made a sudden bound:  
 390 It flung the blood into my head,  
 And I fell down in a swoond.

How long in that same fit I lay,  
 I have not<sup>1</sup> to declare;  
 But ere my living life returned,  
 395 I heard and in my soul discerned  
 Two voices in the air.

"Is it he?" quoth one, "Is this the man?  
 By him who died on cross,  
 With his cruel bow he laid full low  
 400 The harmless Albatross.

The spirit who bideth by himself  
 In the land of mist and snow,  
 He loved the bird that loved the man  
 Who shot him with his bow."  
 405

The other was a softer voice,  
 As soft as honey-dew:  
 Quoth he, "The man hath penance done,  
 And penance more will do."

## Endnotes

- Note 4: Simple, homely.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Shone. These fire-flags are probably St. Elmo's fire (see p. 478, n. 4), but Coleridge may be describing the Aurora Australis, or Southern Lights, and possibly also lightning.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A rushlike plant growing in wet soil.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Supernatural beings halfway between mortals and gods (the type of spirit that Coleridge describes in the gloss beside lines 131–34).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Corpses.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Warbling (Middle English).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, have not the knowledge.[Return to reference 1](#)

## ***Part 6***

### **FIRST VOICE**

410 "But tell me, tell me! speak again,  
Thy soft response renewing—  
What makes that ship drive on so fast?  
What is the ocean doing?"

### **SECOND VOICE**

415 "Still as a slave before his lord,  
The ocean hath no blast;  
His great bright eye most silently  
Up to the Moon is cast—  
  
If he may know which way to go;  
For she guides him smooth or grim.  
420 See, brother, see! how graciously  
She looketh down on him."

### **FIRST VOICE**

"But why drives on that ship so fast,  
Without or wave or wind?"

### **SECOND VOICE**

425 "The air is cut away before,  
And closes from behind.  
  
Fly, brother, fly! more high, more high!  
Or we shall be belated:  
For slow and slow that ship will go,  
When the Mariner's trance is abated."  
  
430 I woke, and we were sailing on  
As in a gentle weather:  
'Twas night, calm night, the moon was high;  
The dead men stood together.  
  
All stood together on the deck,  
For a charnel-dungeon fitter:  
435 All fixed on me their stony eyes,  
That in the Moon did glitter.  
  
The pang, the curse, with which they died,  
Had never passed away:  
440 I could not draw my eyes from theirs,  
Nor turn them up to pray.

And now this spell was snapt: once more  
I viewed the ocean green,  
And looked far forth, yet little saw  
Of what had else been seen—

445

Like one, that on a lonesome road  
Doth walk in fear and dread,  
And having once turned round walks on,  
And turns no more his head;  
Because he knows, a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind him tread.

450

But soon there breathed a wind on me,  
Nor sound nor motion made:  
Its path was not upon the sea,  
In ripple or in shade.

455

It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek  
Like a meadow-gale of spring—  
It mingled strangely with my fears,  
Yet it felt like a welcoming.

Swiftly, swiftly flew the ship,  
Yet she sailed softly too:  
Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze—  
On me alone it blew.

460

Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed  
The light-house top I see?  
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?  
Is this mine own countree?

465

We drifted o'er the harbour-bar,  
And I with sobs did pray—  
O let me be awake, my God!  
Or let me sleep alway.

470

The harbour-bay was clear as glass,  
So smoothly it was strewn!  
And on the bay the moonlight lay,  
And the shadow of the moon.

475

The rock shone bright, the kirk no less,  
That stands above the rock:  
The moonlight steeped in silentness  
The steady weathercock.

And the bay was white with silent light,  
Till rising from the same,  
Full many shapes, that shadows were,  
In crimson colours came.

480

A little distance from the prow

485 Those crimson shadows were:  
 I turned my eyes upon the deck—  
 Oh, Christ! what saw I there!  
  
 Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat,  
 And, by the holy rood!<sup>2</sup>  
 490 A man all light, a seraph-man,<sup>3</sup>  
 On every corse there stood.  
  
 This seraph-band, each waved his hand:  
 It was a heavenly sight!  
 They stood as signals to the land,  
 495 Each one a lovely light;  
  
 This seraph-band, each waved his hand,  
 No voice did they impart—  
 No voice; but oh! the silence sank  
 Like music on my heart.  
  
 500 But soon I heard the dash of oars,  
 I heard the Pilot's cheer;  
 My head was turned perforce away,  
 And I saw a boat appear.  
  
 The Pilot and the Pilot's boy,  
 I heard them coming fast:  
 505 Dear Lord in Heaven! it was a joy  
 The dead men could not blast.  
  
 I saw a third—I heard his voice:  
 It is the Hermit good!  
 He singeth loud his godly hymns  
 510 That he makes in the wood.  
 He'll shrive<sup>4</sup> my soul, he'll wash away  
 The Albatross's blood.

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Cross.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A shining celestial being, highest in the ranks of the angels.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Absolve.[Return to reference 4](#)

## **Part 7**

This Hermit good lives in that wood  
Which slopes down to the sea.  
515 How loudly his sweet voice he rears!  
He loves to talk with marineres  
That come from a far countree.

He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve—  
He hath a cushion plump:  
520 It is the moss that wholly hides  
The rotted old oak-stump.

The skiff-boat neared: I heard them talk,  
"Why, this is strange, I trow!  
Where are those lights so many and fair,  
525 That signal made but now?"

"Strange, by my faith!" the Hermit said—  
"And they answered not our cheer!  
The planks looked warped! and see those sails,  
How thin they are and sere!  
530 I never saw aught like to them,  
Unless perchance it were

Brown skeletons of leaves that lag  
My forest-brook along;  
When the ivy-tod<sup>5</sup> is heavy with snow,  
535 And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,  
That eats the she-wolf's young."

"Dear Lord! it hath a fiendish look"—  
(The Pilot made reply)  
"I am a-feared"—"Push on, push on!"  
540 Said the Hermit cheerily.

The boat came closer to the ship,  
But I nor spake nor stirred;  
The boat came close beneath the ship,  
And straight a sound was heard.  
545

Under the water it rumbled on,  
Still louder and more dread:  
It reached the ship, it split the bay;  
The ship went down like lead.

550 Stunned by that loud and dreadful sound,  
Which sky and ocean smote,  
Like one that hath been seven days drowned  
My body lay afloat;  
But swift as dreams, myself I found  
Within the Pilot's boat.



555 Upon the whirl, where sank the ship,  
 The boat spun round and round;  
 And all was still, save that the hill  
 Was telling of the sound.

560 I moved my lips—the Pilot shrieked  
 And fell down in a fit;  
 The holy Hermit raised his eyes,  
 And prayed where he did sit.

565 I took the oars: the Pilot's boy,  
 Who now doth crazy go,  
 Laughed loud and long, and all the while  
 His eyes went to and fro.  
 "Ha! ha!" quoth he, "full plain I see,  
 The Devil knows how to row."

570 And now, all in my own countree,  
 I stood on the firm land!  
 The Hermit stepped forth from the boat,  
 And scarcely he could stand.

575 "O shrieve me, shrieve me, <sup>6</sup> holy man!"  
 The Hermit crossed his brow. <sup>7</sup>  
 "Say quick," quoth he, "I bid thee say—  
 What manner of man art thou?"

580 Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched  
 With a woful agony,  
 Which forced me to begin my tale;  
 And then it left me free.

585 Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
 That agony returns:  
 And till my ghastly tale is told,  
 This heart within me burns.

590 I pass, like night, from land to land;  
 I have strange power of speech;  
 That moment that his face I see,  
 I know the man that must hear me:  
 To him my tale I teach.

595 What loud uproar bursts from that door!  
 The wedding-guests are there:  
 But in the garden-bower the bride  
 And bride-maids singing are:  
 And hark the little vesper bell,  
 Which biddeth me to prayer!

O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been  
 Alone on a wide wide sea:  
 So lonely 'twas, that God himself

600 Scarce seemed there to be.  
 O sweeter than the marriage-feast,  
 'Tis sweeter far to me,  
 To walk together to the kirk  
 With a goodly company!—  
 605 To walk together to the kirk,  
 And all together pray,  
 While each to his great Father bends,  
 Old men, and babes, and loving friends,  
 And youths and maidens gay!  
 610 Farewell, farewell! but this I tell  
 To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!  
 He prayeth well, who loveth well  
 Both man and bird and beast.  
 He prayeth best, who loveth best  
 All things both great and small;  
 615 For the dear God who loveth us,  
 He made and loveth all.<sup>8</sup>  
 The Mariner, whose eye is bright,  
 Whose beard with age is hoar,  
 620 Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest  
 Turned from the bridegroom's door.  
 He went like one that hath been stunned,  
 And is of sense forlorn:<sup>9</sup>  
 A sadder and a wiser man,  
 625 He rose the morrow morn.

1797

1798, 1817

## Endnotes

- Note 5: Clump of ivy. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Hear my confession and grant me absolution. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Made the sign of the cross on his forehead. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Coleridge said in 1830, answering the objection of the poet Anna Barbauld that the poem "lacked a moral": "I told her that in my own judgment the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the *Arabian Nights*' tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie's son." [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Bereft. [Return to reference 9](#)

# Kubla Khan

## *Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment*

In<sup>1</sup> the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effect of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in *Purchas's Pilgrimage*: "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto: and thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall."<sup>2</sup> The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses,<sup>3</sup> during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter:

Then all the charm

Is broken—all that phantom-world so fair  
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,  
And each mis-shape[s] the other. Stay awhile,  
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes—  
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon  
The visions will return! And lo! he stays,  
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
The pool becomes a mirror.

[From Coleridge's *The Picture; or, the Lover's  
Resolution*, lines 91–100]

Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him. Αὔριον ἄδιον ἄσω:<sup>4</sup> but the to-morrow is yet to come.

As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different character, describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease.<sup>5</sup>—1816.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph,<sup>6</sup> the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.  
5 So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
10 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted

15 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil  
seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
20 Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.  
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
25 Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:  
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

30 The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.  
It was a miracle of rare device,  
35 A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
40 Singing of Mount Abora.<sup>7</sup>  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
45 I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

50                   And all who heard should see them there,  
                  And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
                  His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
                  Weave a circle round him thrice,<sup>8</sup>  
                  And close your eyes with holy dread,  
                  For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
                  And drunk the milk of Paradise.<sup>9</sup>

ca. 1797–98

1816

## Endnotes

- Note 1: In the texts of 1816–29, this note began with an additional short paragraph: “The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, and, as far as the Author’s own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits.” The “poet of . . . celebrity” was Lord Byron.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: “In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be removed from place to place.” From Samuel Purchas’s book of travelers’ tales, *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1613). The historical Kublai Khan founded the Mongol dynasty in China in the 13th century.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In a note on a manuscript copy of “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge gave a more precise account of the nature of this “sleep”: “This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of reverie brought on by two grains of opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797.”[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4:

I shall sing a sweeter song tomorrow (Greek; recalled from Theocritus's *Idylls* 1.145).

A number of Coleridge's assertions in this preface have been debated by critics: whether the poem was written in 1797 or later, whether it was actually composed in a "dream" or opium reverie, even whether it is a fragment or in fact is complete. All critics agree, however, that this visionary poem of demonic inspiration is much more than a mere "psychological curiosity."

[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Coleridge refers to "The Pains of Sleep."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Derived probably from the Greek river Alpheus, which flows into the Ionian Sea. Its waters were fabled to rise again in Sicily as the fountain of Arethusa.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Apparently a reminiscence of Milton's *Paradise Lost* 4.280–82: "where Abassin Kings their issue guard / Mount Amara (though this by some supposed / True Paradise) under the Ethiop line."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A magic ritual, to protect the inspired poet from intrusion.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Lines 50ff. echo in part the description, in Plato's *Ion* 533–34, of inspired poets, who are "like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind."[Return to reference 9](#)

# Christabel<sup>1</sup>

## *Preface*

The first part of the following poem was written in the year 1797, at Stowey, in the county of Somerset. The second part, after my return from Germany, in the year 1800, at Keswick, Cumberland. It is probable, that if the poem had been finished at either of the former periods, or if even the first and second part had been published in the year 1800, the impression of its originality would have been much greater than I dare at present expect. But for this, I have only my own indolence to blame. The dates are mentioned for the exclusive purpose of precluding charges of plagiarism or servile imitation from myself. For there is amongst us a set of critics, who seem to hold, that every possible thought and image is traditional; who have no notion that there are such things as fountains in the world, small as well as great; and who would therefore charitably derive every rill they behold flowing, from a perforation made in some other man's tank. I am confident, however, that as far as the present poem is concerned, the celebrated poets<sup>2</sup> whose writings I might be suspected of having imitated, either in particular passages, or in the tone and the spirit of the whole, would be among the first to vindicate me from the charge, and who, on any striking coincidence, would permit me to address them in this doggerel version of two monkish Latin hexameters.

Tis mine and it is likewise yours;  
But an if this will not do;  
Let it be mine, good friend! for I  
Am the poorer of the two.



I have only to add, that the metre of the Christabel is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from its being founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables.<sup>3</sup> Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four. Nevertheless this occasional variation in number of syllables is not introduced wantonly, or for the mere ends of convenience, but in correspondence with some transition, in the nature of the imagery or passion.

## ***Part 1***

'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock,  
And the owls have awakened the crowing cock;  
Tu—whit!——Tu—whoo!  
And hark, again! the crowing cock,  
How drowsily it crew.

5

Sir Leoline, the Baron rich,  
Hath a toothless mastiff bitch;  
From her kennel beneath the rock  
She maketh answer to the clock,  
Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour;  
Ever and aye, o by shine and shower,  
Sixteen short howls, not over loud;  
Some say, she sees my lady's shroud.

10

Is the night chilly and dark?  
The night is chilly, but not dark.  
The thin gray cloud is spread on high,  
It covers but not hides the sky.  
The moon is behind, and at the full;  
And yet she looks both small and dull.  
The night is chill, the cloud is gray:  
'Tis a month before the month of May,  
And the Spring comes slowly up this way.

15

20

The lovely lady, Christabel,  
Whom her father loves so well,  
What makes her in the wood so late,  
A furlong from the castle gate?  
She had dreams all yesternight  
Of her own betrothed knight;  
And she in the midnight wood will pray  
For the weal o of her lover that's far away.

25

30 She stole along, she nothing spoke,  
The sighs she heaved were soft and low,  
And naught was green upon the oak,  
But moss and rarest mistletoe:<sup>4</sup>  
35 She kneels beneath the huge oak tree,  
And in silence prayeth she.

The lady sprang up suddenly,  
The lovely lady, Christabel!  
It moaned as near, as near can be,  
But what it is, she cannot tell.—  
40 On the other side it seems to be,  
Of the huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree.

The night is chill; the forest bare;  
Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?  
There is not wind enough in the air  
45 To move away the ringlet curl  
From the lovely lady's cheek—  
There is not wind enough to twirl  
The one red leaf, the last of its clan,  
That dances as often as dance it can,  
50 Hanging so light, and hanging so high,  
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.

Hush, beating heart of Christabel!  
Jesu, Maria, shield her well!  
She folded her arms beneath her cloak,  
55 And stole to the other side of the oak.  
What sees she there?

There she sees a damsel bright,  
Drest in a silken robe of white,  
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:  
60 The neck that made that white robe wan,

Her stately neck, and arms were bare;  
Her blue-veined feet unsandal'd were,  
And wildly glittered here and there  
The gems entangled in her hair.  
65 I guess, 'twas frightful there to see  
A lady so richly clad as she—  
Beautiful exceedingly!

"Mary mother, save me now!"  
(Said Christabel,) "And who art thou?"  
70

The lady strange made answer meet,<sup>9</sup>  
And her voice was faint and sweet:—  
"Have pity on my sore distress,  
I scarce can speak for weariness:  
75 Stretch forth thy hand, and have no fear!"  
Said Christabel, "How cam'st thou here?"  
And the lady, whose voice was faint and sweet,  
Did thus pursue her answer meet:—

"My sire is of a noble line,  
And my name is Geraldine:  
80 Five warriors seized me yesternorn,  
Me, even me, a maid forlorn:  
They choked my cries with force and fright,  
And tied me on a palfrey white.  
The palfrey was as fleet as wind,  
85 And they rode furiously behind.  
They spurred amain,<sup>9</sup> their steeds were white:  
And once we crossed the shade of night.  
As sure as Heaven shall rescue me,  
I have no thought what men they be;  
90 Nor do I know how long it is  
(For I have lain entranced I wis<sup>5</sup>)  
Since one, the tallest of the five,  
Took me from the palfrey's back,

95 A weary woman, scarce alive.  
Some muttered words his comrades spoke:  
He placed me underneath this oak;  
He swore they would return with haste;  
Whither they went I cannot tell—  
100 I thought I heard, some minutes past,  
Sounds as of a castle bell.  
Stretch forth thy hand" (thus ended she),  
"And help a wretched maid to flee."

Then Christabel stretched forth her hand  
And comforted fair Geraldine:  
105 "O well, bright dame! may you command  
The service of Sir Leoline;  
And gladly our stout chivalry  
Will he send forth and friends withal  
To guide and guard you safe and free  
110 Home to your noble father's hall."

She rose: and forth with steps they passed  
That strove to be, and were not, fast.  
Her gracious stars the lady blest,  
And thus spake on sweet Christabel:  
115 "All our household are at rest,  
The hall as silent as the cell;  
Sir Leoline is weak in health,  
And may not well awakened be,  
But we will move as if in stealth,  
120 And I beseech your courtesy,  
This night, to share your couch with me."

They crossed the moat, and Christabel  
Took the key that fitted well;  
A little door she opened straight,  
125 All in the middle of the gate;  
The gate that was ironed within and without,

Where an army in battle array had marched out.  
The lady sank, belike through pain,  
And Christabel with might and main  
130 Lifted her up, a weary weight,  
Over the threshold of the gate:<sup>6</sup>  
Then the lady rose again,  
And moved, as she were not in pain.

So free from danger, free from fear,  
135 They crossed the court: right glad they were.  
And Christabel devoutly cried  
To the Lady by her side;  
"Praise we the Virgin all divine  
Who hath rescued thee from thy distress!"  
140 "Alas, alas!" said Geraldine,  
"I cannot speak for weariness."  
So free from danger, free from fear,  
They crossed the court: right glad they were.

Outside her kennel the mastiff old  
145 Lay fast asleep, in moonshine cold.  
The mastiff old did not awake,  
Yet she an angry moan did make!  
And what can ail the mastiff bitch?  
Never till now she uttered yell  
150 Beneath the eye of Christabel.  
Perhaps it is the owlet's scritch:  
For what can ail the mastiff bitch?

They passed the hall, that echoes still,  
Pass as lightly as you will!  
155 The brands were flat, the brands were dying,  
Amid their own white ashes lying;  
But when the lady passed, there came  
A tongue of light, a fit of flame;  
And Christabel saw the lady's eye,

160 And nothing else saw she thereby,  
Save the boss of the shield of Sir Leoline tall,  
Which hung in a murky old niche in the wall.  
"O softly tread," said Christabel,  
165 "My father seldom sleepeth well."

Sweet Christabel her feet doth bare,  
And, jealous of the listening air,  
They steal their way from stair to stair,  
Now in glimmer, and now in gloom,  
And now they pass the Baron's room,  
170 As still as death with stifled breath!  
And now have reached her chamber door;  
And now doth Geraldine press down  
The rushes<sup>z</sup> of the chamber floor.

175 The moon shines dim in the open air,  
And not a moonbeam enters here.  
But they without its light can see  
The chamber carved so curiously,  
Carved with figures strange and sweet,  
All made out of the carver's brain,  
180 For a lady's chamber meet:  
The lamp with twofold silver chain  
Is fastened to an angel's feet.

The silver lamp burns dead and dim;  
But Christabel the lamp will trim.  
185 She trimmed the lamp, and made it bright,  
And left it swinging to and fro,  
While Geraldine, in wretched plight,  
Sank down upon the floor below.

190 "O weary lady, Geraldine,  
I pray you, drink this cordial wine!  
It is a wine of virtuous powers;

My mother made it of wild flowers."

195 "And will your mother pity me,  
Who am a maiden most forlorn?"  
Christabel answered—"Woe is me!  
She died the hour that I was born.  
I have heard the grey-haired friar tell,  
How on her death-bed she did say,  
200 That she should hear the castle-bell  
Strike twelve upon my wedding day.  
O mother dear! that thou wert here!"  
"I would," said Geraldine, "she were!"

But soon with altered voice, said she—  
205 "Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!<sup>8</sup>  
I have power to bid thee flee."  
Alas! what ails poor Geraldine?  
Why stares she with unsettled eye?  
Can she the bodiless dead espy?  
And why with hollow voice cries she,  
210 "Off, woman, off! this hour is mine—  
Though thou her guardian spirit be,  
Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me."

Then Christabel knelt by the lady's side,  
And raised to heaven her eyes so blue—  
215 "Alas!" said she, "this ghastly ride—  
Dear lady! it hath wildered you!"  
The lady wiped her moist cold brow,  
And faintly said, "'tis over now!"

220 Again the wild-flower wine she drank:  
Her fair large eyes 'gan glitter bright,  
And from the floor whereon she sank,  
The lofty lady stood upright;  
She was most beautiful to see,



225      Like a lady of a far countrée.

And thus the lofty lady spake—  
"All they who live in the upper sky,  
Do love you, holy Christabel!  
And you love them, and for their sake  
And for the good which me befell,  
230      Even I in my degree will try,  
Fair maiden, to requite you well.  
But now unrobe yourself; for I  
Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie."

235      Quoth Christabel, "So let it be!"  
And as the lady bade, did she.  
Her gentle limbs did she undress,  
And lay down in her loveliness.

But through her brain of weal and woe  
240      So many thoughts moved to and fro,  
That vain it were her lids to close;  
So half-way from the bed she rose,  
And on her elbow did recline  
To look at the lady Geraldine.

245      Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,  
And slowly rolled her eyes around;  
Then drawing in her breath aloud,  
Like one that shuddered, she unbound  
The cincture<sup>o</sup> from beneath her breast:  
Her silken robe, and inner vest,  
250      Dropt to her feet, and full in view,  
Behold! her bosom and half her side——  
A sight to dream of, not to tell!  
O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!<sup>9</sup>

Yet Geraldine nor speaks nor stirs;

Ah! what a stricken look was hers!  
255 Deep from within she seems half-way  
To lift some weight with sick assay,<sup>o</sup>  
And eyes the maid and seeks delay;  
Then suddenly as one defied  
260 Collects herself in scorn and pride,  
And lay down by the maiden's side!—  
And in her arms the maid she took,  
Ah well-a-day!  
And with low voice and doleful look  
265 These words did say:  
"In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,  
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!  
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow  
This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;  
270 But vainly thou warrest,  
For this is alone in  
Thy power to declare,  
That in the dim forest  
Thou heard'st a low moaning,  
275 And found'st a bright lady, surpassingly fair:  
And didst bring her home with thee in love and in  
charity,  
To shield her and shelter her from the damp air."

## ***The Conclusion to Part 1***

It was a lovely sight to see  
The lady Christabel, when she  
280 Was praying at the old oak tree.  
    Amid the jagged shadows  
    Of mossy leafless boughs,  
    Kneeling in the moonlight,  
    To make her gentle vows;  
285 Her slender palms together prest,  
Heaving sometimes on her breast;  
Her face resigned to bliss or bale<sup>o</sup>—  
Her face, oh call it fair not pale,  
And both blue eyes more bright than clear,  
290 Each about to have a tear.

With open eyes (ah woe is me!)  
Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,  
Fearfully dreaming, yet I wis,  
Dreaming that alone, which is—  
295 O sorrow and shame! Can this be she,  
The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?  
And lo! the worker of these harms,  
That holds the maiden in her arms,  
Seems to slumber still and mild,  
300 As a mother with her child.

A star hath set, a star hath risen,  
O Geraldine! since arms of thine  
Have been the lovely lady's prison.  
O Geraldine! one hour was thine—  
305 Thou'st had thy will! By tairn<sup>1</sup> and rill,  
The night-birds all that hour were still.  
But now they are jubilant anew,  
From cliff and tower, tu—whoo! tu—whoo!

310 Tu—whoo! tu—whoo! from wood and fell!<sup>2</sup>

And see! the lady Christabel  
Gathers herself from out her trance;  
Her limbs relax, her countenance  
Grows sad and soft; the smooth thin lids  
Close o'er her eyes; and tears she sheds—  
315 Large tears that leave the lashes bright!  
And oft the while she seems to smile  
As infants at a sudden light!  
Yea, she doth smile, and she doth weep,  
Like a youthful hermitess,  
320 Beauteous in a wilderness,  
Who, praying always, prays in sleep.  
And, if she move unquietly,  
Perchance, 'tis but the blood so free,  
Comes back and tingles in her feet.  
325 No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.  
What if her guardian spirit 'twere?  
What if she knew her mother near?  
But this she knows, in joys and woes,  
That saints will aid if men will call:  
330 For the blue sky bends over all!

## **Part 2**

“Each matin bell,” the Baron saith,  
“Knells us back to a world of death.”  
These words Sir Leoline first said,  
When he rose and found his lady dead:  
335 These words Sir Leoline will say,  
Many a morn to his dying day!

And hence the custom and law began,  
That still at dawn the sacristan,<sup>3</sup>  
Who duly pulls the heavy bell,  
340 Five and forty beads must tell<sup>4</sup>  
Between each stroke—a warning knell,  
Which not a soul can choose but hear  
From Bratha Head to Wyndermere.<sup>5</sup>

Saith Bracy the bard, “So let it knell!  
And let the drowsy sacristan  
Still count as slowly as he can!  
There is no lack of such, I ween,<sup>o</sup>  
As well fill up the space between.  
In Langdale Pike<sup>o</sup> and Witch’s Lair,  
350 And Dungeon-ghyll<sup>6</sup> so foully rent,  
With ropes of rock and bells of air  
Three sinful sextons’ ghosts are pent,  
Who all give back, one after t’other,  
The death-note to their living brother;  
355 And oft too, by the knell offended,  
Just as their one! two! three! is ended,  
The devil mocks the doleful tale  
With a merry peal from Borodale.”

The air is still! through mist and cloud

360 That merry peal comes ringing loud;  
And Geraldine shakes off her dread,  
And rises lightly from the bed;  
Puts on her silken vestments white,  
365 And tricks her hair in lovely plight,<sup>o</sup>  
And nothing doubting of her spell  
Awakens the lady Christabel.  
"Sleep you, sweet lady Christabel?  
I trust that you have rested well."

370 And Christabel awoke and spied  
The same who lay down by her side—  
O rather say, the same whom she  
Raised up beneath the old oak tree!  
Nay, fairer yet! and yet more fair!  
For she belike hath drunken deep  
375 Of all the blessedness of sleep!  
And while she spake, her looks, her air  
Such gentle thankfulness declare,  
That (so it seemed) her girded vests  
Grew tight beneath her heaving breasts.  
380 "Sure I have sinned!" said Christabel,  
"Now heaven be praised if all be well!"  
And in low faltering tones, yet sweet,  
Did she the lofty lady greet  
With such perplexity of mind  
385 As dreams too lively leave behind.

So quickly she rose, and quickly arrayed  
Her maiden limbs, and having prayed  
That He, who on the cross did groan,  
390 Might wash away her sins unknown,  
She forthwith led fair Geraldine  
To meet her sire, Sir Leoline.

The lovely maid and the lady tall

395       Are pacing both into the hall,  
          And pacing on through page and groom,  
          Enter the Baron's presence room.

          The Baron rose, and while he prest  
          His gentle daughter to his breast,  
          With cheerful wonder in his eyes  
400       The lady Geraldine espies,  
          And gave such welcome to the same,  
          As might beseem so bright a dame!

          But when he heard the lady's tale,  
          And when she told her father's name,  
405       Why waxed Sir Leoline so pale,  
          Murmuring o'er the name again,  
          Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine?

          Alas! they had been friends in youth;  
          But whispering tongues can poison truth;  
          And constancy lives in realms above;  
410       And life is thorny; and youth is vain;  
          And to be wroth with one we love,  
          Doth work like madness in the brain.  
          And thus it chanced, as I divine,  
          With Roland and Sir Leoline.  
415       Each spake words of high disdain  
          And insult to his heart's best brother:  
          They parted—ne'er to meet again!  
          But never either found another  
          To free the hollow heart from paining—  
420       They stood aloof, the scars remaining,  
          Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;  
          A dreary sea now flows between;—  
          But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder,  
          Shall wholly do away, I ween,  
425       The marks of that which once hath been.

Sir Leoline, a moment's space,  
Stood gazing on the damsel's face:  
And the youthful Lord of Tryermaine  
Came back upon his heart again.  
430

O then the Baron forgot his age,  
His noble heart swelled high with rage;  
He swore by the wounds in Jesu's side,  
He would proclaim it far and wide  
435 With trump and solemn heraldry,  
That they who thus had wronged the dame,  
Were base as spotted infamy!  
"And if they dare deny the same,  
My herald shall appoint a week,  
And let the recreant traitors seek  
440 My tourney court<sup>7</sup>—that there and then  
I may dislodge their reptile souls  
From the bodies and forms of men!"  
He spake: his eye in lightning rolls!  
For the lady was ruthlessly seized; and he kenned  
445 In the beautiful lady the child of his friend!

And now the tears were on his face,  
And fondly in his arms he took  
Fair Geraldine, who met the embrace,  
Prolonging it with joyous look.  
450 Which when she viewed, a vision fell  
Upon the soul of Christabel,  
The vision of fear, the touch and pain!  
She shrunk and shuddered, and saw again—  
(Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee,  
455 Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?)  
Again she saw that bosom old,  
Again she felt that bosom cold,  
And drew in her breath with a hissing sound:



460       Whereat the Knight turned wildly round,  
And nothing saw, but his own sweet maid  
With eyes upraised, as one that prayed.

          The touch, the sight, had passed away,  
And in its stead that vision blest,  
Which comforted her after-rest,  
465       While in the lady's arms she lay,  
Had put a rapture in her breast,  
And on her lips and o'er her eyes  
Spread smiles like light!

  With new surprise,  
"What ails then my beloved child?"  
470       The Baron said—His daughter mild  
Made answer, "All will yet be well!"  
I ween, she had no power to tell  
Aught else: so mighty was the spell.

475       Yet he, who saw this Geraldine,  
Had deemed her sure a thing divine.  
Such sorrow with such grace she blended,  
As if she feared, she had offended  
Sweet Christabel, that gentle maid!  
And with such lowly tones she prayed,  
480       She might be sent without delay  
Home to her father's mansion.

  "Nay!  
Nay, by my soul!" said Leoline.  
"Ho! Bracy, the bard, the charge be thine!  
Go thou, with music sweet and loud,  
485       And take two steeds with trappings proud,  
And take the youth whom thou lov'st best  
To bear thy harp, and learn thy song,  
And clothe you both in solemn vest,  
And over the mountains haste along,  
490       Lest wandering folk, that are abroad,

Detain you on the valley road.  
And when he has crossed the Irthing flood,  
My merry bard! he hastes, he hastes  
Up Knorren Moor, through Halegarth Wood,  
495 And reaches soon that castle good  
Which stands and threatens Scotland's wastes.

"Bard Bracy! bard Bracy! your horses are fleet,  
Ye must ride up the hall, your music so sweet,  
More loud than your horses' echoing feet!  
500 And loud and loud to Lord Roland call,  
Thy daughter is safe in Langdale hall!  
Thy beautiful daughter is safe and free—  
Sir Leoline greets thee thus through me.  
He bids thee come without delay  
505 With all thy numerous array;  
And take thy lovely daughter home:  
And he will meet thee on the way  
With all his numerous array  
White with their panting palfreys' foam:  
510 And by mine honour! I will say,  
That I repent me of the day  
When I spake words of fierce disdain  
To Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine!—  
—For since that evil hour hath flown,  
515 Many a summer's sun hath shone;  
Yet ne'er found I a friend again  
Like Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine."

The lady fell, and clasped his knees,  
Her face upraised, her eyes o'erflowing;  
520 And Bracy replied, with faltering voice,  
His gracious hail on all bestowing!—  
"Thy words, thou sire of Christabel,  
Are sweeter than my harp can tell;  
Yet might I gain a boon of thee,

525 This day my journey should not be,  
So strange a dream hath come to me;  
That I had vowed with music loud  
To clear yon wood from thing unblest,  
Warned by a vision in my rest!  
530 For in my sleep I saw that dove,  
That gentle bird, whom thou dost love,  
And call'st by thy own daughter's name—  
Sir Leoline! I saw the same  
Fluttering, and uttering fearful moan,  
535 Among the green herbs in the forest alone.  
Which when I saw and when I heard,  
I wonder'd what might ail the bird;  
For nothing near it could I see,  
Save the grass and green herbs underneath the old  
540 tree.

"And in my dream methought I went  
To search out what might there be found;  
And what the sweet bird's trouble meant,  
That thus lay fluttering on the ground.  
I went and peered, and could descry  
545 No cause for her distressful cry;  
But yet for her dear lady's sake  
I stooped, methought, the dove to take,  
When lo! I saw a bright green snake  
Coiled around its wings and neck,  
550 Green as the herbs on which it couched,  
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;  
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,  
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!  
I woke; it was the midnight hour,  
555 The clock was echoing in the tower;  
But though my slumber was gone by,  
This dream it would not pass away—  
It seems to live upon my eye!

560 And thence I vowed this self-same day,  
With music strong and saintly song  
To wander through the forest bare,  
Lest aught unholy loiter there."

Thus Bracy said: the Baron, the while,  
Half-listening heard him with a smile;  
565 Then turned to Lady Geraldine,  
His eyes made up of wonder and love;  
And said in courtly accents fine,  
"Sweet maid, Lord Roland's beauteous dove,  
With arms more strong than harp or song,  
570 Thy sire and I will crush the snake!"  
He kissed her forehead as he spake,  
And Geraldine, in maiden wise,<sup>o</sup>  
Casting down her large bright eyes,  
With blushing cheek and courtesy fine  
575 She turned her from Sir Leoline;  
Softly gathering up her train,  
That o'er her right arm fell again;  
And folded her arms across her chest,  
And couched her head upon her breast,  
580 And looked askance at Christabel—  
Jesu Maria, shield her well!

A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy,  
And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head,  
Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye,  
585 And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread,  
At Christabel she looked askance!—  
One moment—and the sight was fled!  
But Christabel in dizzy trance  
Stumbling on the unsteady ground  
590 Shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound;  
And Geraldine again turned round,  
And like a thing, that sought relief,

595 Full of wonder and full of grief,  
She rolled her large bright eyes divine  
Wildly on Sir Leoline.

The maid, alas! her thoughts are gone,  
She nothing sees—no sight but one!  
The maid, devoid of guile and sin,  
I know not how, in fearful wise  
600 So deeply had she drunken in  
That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,  
That all her features were resigned  
To this sole image in her mind;  
And passively did imitate  
605 That look of dull and treacherous hate!  
And thus she stood, in dizzy trance,  
Still picturing that look askance  
With forced unconscious sympathy  
Full before her father's view——  
610 As far as such a look could be,  
In eyes so innocent and blue!  
And when the trance was o'er, the maid  
Paused awhile, and inly prayed:  
Then falling at the Baron's feet,  
615 "By my mother's soul do I entreat  
That thou this woman send away!"  
She said: and more she could not say:  
For what she knew she could not tell,  
O'er-mastered by the mighty spell.

620 Why is thy cheek so wan and wild,  
Sir Leoline? Thy only child  
Lies at thy feet, thy joy, thy pride,  
So fair, so innocent, so mild;  
The same, for whom thy lady died!  
625 O by the pangs of her dear mother  
Think thou no evil of thy child!

For her, and thee, and for no other,  
She prayed the moment ere she died:  
Prayed that the babe for whom she died,  
630 Might prove her dear lord's joy and pride!  
That prayer her deadly pangs beguiled,  
Sir Leoline!  
And wouldst thou wrong thy only child,  
Her child and thine?

635  
Within the Baron's heart and brain  
If thoughts, like these, had any share,  
They only swelled his rage and pain,  
And did but work confusion there.  
His heart was cleft with pain and rage,  
640 His cheeks they quivered, his eyes were wild,  
Dishonoured thus in his old age;  
Dishonoured by his only child,  
And all his hospitality  
To the wrong'd daughter of his friend  
645 By more than woman's jealousy  
Brought thus to a disgraceful end—  
He rolled his eye with stern regard  
Upon the gentle minstrel bard,  
And said in tones abrupt, austere—  
650 "Why, Bracy! dost thou loiter here?  
I bade thee hence!" The bard obeyed;  
And turning from his own sweet maid,  
The aged knight, Sir Leoline,  
Led forth the lady Geraldine!  
655

## ***The Conclusion to Part 2***

A little child, a limber elf,  
Singing, dancing to itself,  
A fairy thing with red round cheeks,  
That always finds, and never seeks,  
Makes such a vision to the sight  
660 As fills a father's eyes with light;  
And pleasures flow in so thick and fast  
Upon his heart, that he at last  
Must needs express his love's excess  
With words of unmeant bitterness.  
665 Perhaps 'tis pretty to force together  
Thoughts so all unlike each other;  
To mutter and mock a broken charm,  
To dally with wrong that does no harm.  
Perhaps 'tis tender too and pretty  
670 At each wild word to feel within  
A sweet recoil of love and pity.  
And what, if in a world of sin  
(O sorrow and shame should this be true!)  
Such giddiness of heart and brain  
675 Comes seldom save from rage and pain,  
So talks as it's most used to do.

1798–1800

1816

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1: Coleridge had planned to publish *Christabel* in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) but had not been able to complete the poem. When *Christabel* was finally published in 1816 in its present fragmentary state, he still hoped to finish it, for the Preface contained this sentence (deleted in the edition of 1834): "But as, in my very first conception of the tale, I had the whole present to my mind, with the wholeness, no less than

with the liveliness of a vision; I trust that I shall be able to embody in verse the three parts yet to come, in the course of the present year.”[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron, who had read and admired *Christabel* while it circulated in manuscript. Coleridge has in mind Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) and Byron’s *Siege of Corinth* (1816), which showed the influence of *Christabel*, especially in their meter.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Much of the earlier English versification, following the example of Old English poetry, had been based on stress, or “accent,” and some of it shows as much freedom in varying the number of syllables as does *Christabel*. The poem, however, is a radical departure from the theory and practice of versification in the 18th century, which had been based on a recurrent number of syllables in each line.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In Celtic Britain the mistletoe (a parasitic plant) was regarded with reverence when it was found growing—as it rarely does—on an oak tree. (Its usual host is the apple tree.)[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: I believe (Coleridge’s misinterpretation of the Middle English adverb *ywis*, meaning “certainly”).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: According to legend, a witch cannot cross the threshold by her own power because it has been blessed against evil spirits.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Often used as a floor covering in the Middle Ages.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* 1.3.22. “Wandering”: term that could designate a fit of hysteria.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In several manuscripts and the first printing, this line reads “And she is to sleep by [*or with*] Christabel.”[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Tarn, a mountain pool.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Elevated moor, or hill.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Church officer who digs the graves and rings the bells.[Return to reference 3](#)



- Note 4: Pray while “telling” (keeping count of) the beads of a rosary.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: These and the following names are of places in the English Lake District.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Ravine forming the bed of a stream.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Arena for tournaments.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *always*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *well-being*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *appropriate*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *at top speed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *of a monastery*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *belt*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *attempt*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *evil, sorrow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *believe*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Peak*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *plait*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *manner*[Return to reference °](#)

## Frost at Midnight<sup>1</sup>

The frost performs its secret ministry,  
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry  
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.  
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,  
5 Have left me to that solitude, which suits  
Abstruser musings: save that at my side  
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.  
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs  
And vexes meditation with its strange  
10 And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,  
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,  
With all the numberless goings on of life,  
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame  
Lies on my low burnt fire, and quivers not;  
15 Only that film,<sup>2</sup> which fluttered on the grate,  
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.  
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
Making it a companionable form,  
20 Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit  
By its own moods interprets, every where  
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,  
And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,  
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,  
25 Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,  
To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft  
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt  
Of my sweet birth-place,<sup>3</sup> and the old church-tower,

Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang  
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,  
30 So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me  
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear  
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!  
So gazed I, till the soothing things I dreamt  
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!  
35 And so I brooded all the following morn,  
Awed by the stern preceptor's<sup>4</sup> face, mine eye  
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:  
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched  
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,  
40 For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,  
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,  
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!<sup>5</sup>

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,  
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,  
45 Fill up the interspersed vacancies  
And momentary pauses of the thought!  
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart  
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,  
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore  
50 And in far other scenes! For I was reared  
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,  
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.  
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
55 Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which thy God  
60 Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself.

Great universal Teacher! he shall mould  
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

65        Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,  
Whether the summer clothe the general earth  
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing  
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch  
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night thatch  
70        Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall  
Heard only in the trances of the blast,  
Or if the secret ministry of frost  
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,  
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Feb. 1798

1798, 1829

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The scene is Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey; the infant in line 7 is his son Hartley, then aged seventeen months. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In all parts of the kingdom these films are called *strangers* and supposed to portend the arrival of some absent friend [*Coleridge's note*]. The "film" is a piece of soot fluttering on the bar of the grate. See Cowper's *The Task* 4.292–95, in which the poet describes how, dreaming before the parlor fire, he watches "The sooty films that play upon the bars, / Pendulous and foreboding, in the view / Of superstition prophesying still, / Though still deceived, some stranger's near approach." Several editions of Cowper's poems were advertised on the verso of the last page of Coleridge's text in the 1798 volume in which "Frost at Midnight" was first published. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Coleridge was born at Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire, but went to school in London, beginning at the age of nine. [Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: The Reverend James Boyer at Coleridge's school, Christ's Hospital.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, when both Coleridge and his sister Ann still wore infant clothes, before he was deemed old enough to be breeched.[Return to reference 5](#)

# Dejection: An Ode<sup>1</sup>

Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,  
With the old Moon in her arms;  
And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!  
We shall have a deadly storm.

—*Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence*

## 1

Well! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made  
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,  
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence  
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade  
5 Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,  
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes  
Upon the strings of this Eolian lute,<sup>2</sup>  
Which better far were mute.  
For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!  
And overspread with phantom light,  
10 (With swimming phantom light o'erspread  
But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)  
I see the old Moon in her lap, foretelling  
The coming on of rain and squally blast.  
And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,  
15 And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!  
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they  
awed,  
And sent my soul abroad,  
Might now perhaps their wonted<sup>o</sup> impulse give,

20 Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and  
live!

## 2

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,  
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,  
In word, or sigh, or tear—  
25 O Lady! <sup>3</sup> in this wan and heartless mood,  
To other thoughts by yonder throstle woo'd,  
All this long eve, so balmy and serene,  
Have I been gazing on the western sky,  
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:  
And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!  
30 And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,  
That give away their motion to the stars;  
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,  
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:  
Yon crescent Moon as fixed as if it grew  
35 In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;  
I see them all so excellently fair,  
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

## 3

My genial <sup>o</sup> spirits fail;  
And what can these avail  
40 To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?  
It were a vain endeavour,  
Though I should gaze for ever  
On that green light that lingers in the west:  
I may not hope from outward forms to win  
45 The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

## 4

O Lady! we receive but what we give,  
And in our life alone does nature live:  
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!<sup>4</sup>  
And would we aught<sup>o</sup> behold, of higher worth,  
50 Than that inanimate cold world allowed  
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,  
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth,  
A light, a glory,<sup>5</sup> a fair luminous cloud  
Enveloping the Earth—  
55 And from the soul itself must there be sent  
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,  
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

## 5

O pure of heart! thou need'st not ask of me  
What this strong music in the soul may be!  
60 What, and wherein it doth exist,  
This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,  
This beautiful and beauty-making power.  
Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given,  
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,  
65 Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower,  
Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,  
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower,  
A new Earth and new Heaven,<sup>6</sup>  
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—  
70 Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—  
We in ourselves rejoice!  
And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,  
All melodies the echoes of that voice,  
75 All colours a suffusion from that light.



## 6

There was a time when, though my path was rough,  
This joy within me dallied with distress,  
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff  
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:  
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,  
80 And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.  
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:  
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth,  
But oh! each visitation<sup>o</sup>  
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,  
85 My shaping spirit of Imagination.  
For not to think of what I needs must feel,  
But to be still and patient, all I can;  
And haply by abstruse research to steal  
From my own nature all the natural man—  
90 This was my sole resource, my only plan:  
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,  
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.

## 7

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,  
Reality's dark dream!  
95 I turn from you, and listen to the wind,  
Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream  
Of agony by torture lengthened out  
That lute sent forth! Thou Wind, that ravest without,  
Bare crag, or mountain-tairn,<sup>z</sup> or blasted tree,  
100 Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,<sup>o</sup>  
Or lonely house, long held the witches' home,  
Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,  
Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers,  
Of dark brown gardens, and of peeping flowers,

105 Mak'st Devils' yule,<sup>8</sup> with worse than wintry song,  
The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.  
Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds!  
Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold!  
What tell'st thou now about?  
110 'Tis of the rushing of a host in rout,  
With groans of trampled men, with smarting  
wounds—  
At once they groan with pain, and shudder with the  
cold!  
But hush! there is a pause of deepest silence!  
And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,  
115 With groans, and tremulous shudderings—all is over  
—  
It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and  
loud!  
A tale of less affright,  
And tempered with delight,  
As Otway's<sup>9</sup> self had framed the tender lay,  
120 'Tis of a little child  
Upon a lonesome wild,  
Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:  
And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,  
And now screams loud, and hopes to make her  
125 mother hear.

## 8

'Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:  
Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep!  
Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing,  
And may this storm be but a mountain-birth,<sup>1</sup>  
May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,  
130 Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth!  
With light heart may she rise,

135                    Gay fancy, cheerful eyes,  
                     Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;  
To her may all things live, from pole to pole,  
                     Their life the eddying of her living soul!  
                     O simple spirit, guided from above,  
Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice,  
                     Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice.

Apr. 4, 1802

1802

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This poem originated in a verse letter of 340 lines, called "A Letter to ———," that Coleridge wrote on the night of April 4, 1802, after hearing the opening stanzas of "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," which Wordsworth had just composed. The "Letter" was addressed to Sara Hutchinson (whom Coleridge sometimes called "Asra"), the sister of Wordsworth's fiancée, Mary. It picked up the theme of a loss in the quality of perceptual experience that Wordsworth had presented at the beginning of his "Ode." In his original poem Coleridge lamented at length his unhappy marriage and the hopelessness of his love for Sara Hutchinson. In the next six months Coleridge deleted more than half the original lines, revised and reordered the remaining passages, and so transformed a long verse confession into the compact and dignified "Dejection: An Ode." He published the "Ode," in substantially its present form, on October 4, 1802, Wordsworth's wedding day—and also the seventh anniversary of Coleridge's own disastrous marriage to Sara Flicker.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A stringed instrument played upon by the wind (see "The Eolian Harp," p. 471, n. 1, above.).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In the original version "Sara"—Sara Hutchinson. After intervening versions, in which the poem was addressed first to "William" (Wordsworth) and then to "Edmund," Coleridge introduced the noncommittal "Lady" in 1817.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: That is, nature's wedding garment and shroud are ours to give to her.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Halo. Coleridge often uses the term to identify in particular the phenomenon that occurs in the mountains when a walker sees his or her own figure projected by the sun in the mist, enlarged and with light encircling its head.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The sense becomes clearer if line 68 is punctuated in the way that Coleridge punctuated it when quoting the passage in one of his essays: "Which, wedding Nature to us, gives in dower." That is, Joy marries us to Nature and gives us, for our dowry, "a new Earth and a new Heaven," a phrase echoing Revelation 21:1.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Tarn, or mountain pool.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Christmas as, in a perverted form, it is celebrated by devils.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Thomas Otway (1652–1685), a dramatist noted for the pathos of his tragic passages. The poet originally named was "William," and the allusion was probably to Wordsworth's "Lucy Gray."[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Probably, "May this be a typical mountain storm, short though violent," although Coleridge might have intended an allusion to Horace's phrase "the mountain labored and brought forth a mouse."[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *customary*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *creative*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *anything*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *of affliction*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *climbed*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Pains of Sleep<sup>1</sup>

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,  
It hath not been my use<sup>o</sup> to pray  
With moving lips or bended knees;  
But silently, by slow degrees,  
My spirit I to Love compose,  
5 In humble trust mine eye-lids close,  
With reverential resignation,  
No wish conceived, no thought exprest,  
Only a sense of supplication;  
A sense o'er all my soul imprest  
10 That I am weak, yet not unblest,  
Since in me, round me, every where  
Eternal strength and wisdom are.

But yester-night I prayed aloud  
In anguish and in agony,  
15 Up-starting from the fiendish crowd  
Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:  
A lurid light, a trampling throng,  
Sense of intolerable wrong,  
And whom I scorned, those only strong!  
20 Thirst of revenge, the powerless will  
Still baffled, and yet burning still!  
Desire with loathing strangely mixed  
On wild or hateful objects fixed.  
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!  
25 And shame and terror over all!  
Deeds to be hid which were not hid,  
Which all confused I could not know,  
Whether I suffered, or I did:  
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,

30 My own or others still the same  
 Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.  
  
 So two nights passed: the night's dismay  
 Saddened and stunned the coming day.  
 Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me  
 35 Distemper's worst calamity.  
 The third night, when my own loud scream  
 Had waked me from the fiendish dream,  
 O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild,  
 I wept as I had been a child;  
 40 And having thus by tears subdued  
 My anguish to a milder mood,  
 Such punishments, I said, were due  
 To natures deepliest stained with sin,—  
 For aye entempesting anew  
 45 The unfathomable hell within,  
 The horror of their deeds to view,  
 To know and loathe, yet wish and do!  
 Such griefs with such men well agree,  
 But wherefore, wherefore fall on me?  
 50 To be beloved is all I need,  
 And whom I love, I love indeed.

1803

1816

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

Coleridge included a draft of this poem in a letter to Robert Southey, September 11, 1803, in which he wrote that "my spirits are dreadful, owing entirely to the Horrors of every night—I truly dread to sleep. It is no shadow with me, but substantial Misery foot-thick, that makes me sit by my bedside of a morning, & cry—. I have abandoned all opiates except Ether but one; & that only in *fits*. . . ." The last sentence indicates what Coleridge did not know—that his guilty nightmares were

probably withdrawal symptoms from opium. The dreams he describes are very similar to those that Thomas De Quincey represents as "The Reign of Opium" in his *Confessions of an*  
[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *custom*[Return to reference °](#)

# To William Wordsworth

***Composed on the Night after His Recitation of a Poem on  
the Growth of an Individual Mind<sup>1</sup>***

5 Friend of the wise! and teacher of the good!  
Into my heart have I received that lay<sup>o</sup>  
More than historic, that prophetic lay  
Wherein (high theme by thee first sung aright)  
Of the foundations and the building up  
Of a Human Spirit thou hast dared to tell  
What may be told, to the understanding mind  
Revealable; and what within the mind  
By vital breathings secret as the soul  
10 Of vernal<sup>o</sup> growth, oft quickens in the heart  
Thoughts all too deep for words!<sup>2</sup>—

Theme hard as

high!  
Of smiles spontaneous, and mysterious fears  
(The first-born they of Reason and twin birth),  
Of tides obedient to external force,  
And currents self-determined, as might seem,  
15 Or by some inner power; of moments awful,<sup>o</sup>  
Now in thy inner life, and now abroad,  
When power streamed from thee, and thy soul  
received  
The light reflected, as a light bestowed—  
Of fancies fair, and milder hours of youth,  
20 Hyblean<sup>3</sup> murmurs of poetic thought  
Industrious in its joy, in vales and glens  
Native or outland, lakes and famous hills!



25 Or on the lonely high-road, when the stars  
Were rising; or by secret mountain-streams,  
The guides and the companions of thy way!

Of more than Fancy, of the Social Sense  
Distending wide, and man beloved as man,  
Where France in all her towns lay vibrating  
Like some becalmed bark beneath the burst  
30 Of Heaven's immediate thunder, when no cloud  
Is visible, or shadow on the main.  
For thou wert there, thine own brows garlanded,  
Amid the tremor of a realm aglow,  
Amid a mighty nation jubilant,  
35 When from the general heart of human kind  
Hope sprang forth like a full-born Deity!  
—Of that dear Hope afflicted and struck down,  
So summoned homeward, thenceforth calm and sure  
From the dread watch-tower of man's absolute self,  
40 With light unwaning on her eyes, to look  
Far on—herself a glory to behold,  
The Angel of the vision!<sup>4</sup> Then (last strain)  
Of Duty, chosen laws controlling choice,  
Action and joy!—An Orphic song<sup>5</sup> indeed,  
45 A song divine of high and passionate thoughts  
To their own music chanted!

O great Bard!  
Ere yet that last strain dying awed the air,  
With steadfast eye I viewed thee in the choir  
Of ever-enduring men. The truly great  
50 Have all one age, and from one visible space  
Shed influence! They, both in power and act,  
Are permanent, and Time is not with them,  
Save as it worketh for them, they in it.  
Nor less a sacred roll, than those of old,  
And to be placed, as they, with gradual fame

55 Among the archives of mankind, thy work  
Makes audible a linked lay of Truth,  
Of Truth profound a sweet continuous lay,  
Not learnt, but native, her own natural notes!  
60 Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn,  
The pulses of my being beat anew:  
And even as life returns upon the drowned,  
Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pains—  
Keen pangs of Love, awakening as a babe  
65 Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart;  
And fears self-willed, that shunned the eye of hope;  
And hope that scarce would know itself from fear;  
Sense of past youth, and manhood come in vain,  
And genius given, and knowledge won in vain;  
70 And all which I had culled in wood-walks wild,  
And all which patient toil had reared, and all,  
Commune with thee had opened out—but flowers  
Strewed on my corse, and borne upon my bier,  
In the same coffin, for the self-same grave!

75 That way no more! and ill beseems it me,  
Who came a welcomer in herald's guise,  
Singing of glory, and futurity,  
To wander back on such unhealthful road,  
Plucking the poisons of self-harm! And ill  
80 Such intertwine beseems triumphal wreaths  
Strewed before thy advancing!

Nor do thou,  
Sage Bard! impair the memory of that hour  
Of thy communion with my nobler mind<sup>6</sup>  
By pity or grief, already felt too long!  
85 Nor let my words import more blame than needs.  
The tumult rose and ceased: for peace is nigh  
Where wisdom's voice has found a listening heart.  
Amid the howl of more than wintry storms,

90 The halcyon<sup>7</sup> hears the voice of vernal hours  
Already on the wing.

Eve following eve,<sup>8</sup>  
Dear tranquil time, when the sweet sense of Home  
Is sweetest! moments for their own sake hailed  
And more desired, more precious for thy song,  
In silence listening, like a devout child,  
95 My soul lay passive, by thy various strain  
Driven as in surges now beneath the stars,  
With momentary stars of my own birth,  
Fair constellated foam, still darting off  
Into the darkness; now a tranquil sea,  
100 Outspread and bright, yet swelling to the moon.

And when—O Friend! my comforter and guide!  
Strong in thyself, and powerful to give strength!—  
Thy long sustained Song finally closed,  
And thy deep voice had ceased—yet thou thyself  
105 Wert still before my eyes, and round us both  
That happy vision of beloved faces—  
Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close  
I sate, my being blended in one thought  
(Thought was it? or aspiration? or resolve?)  
110 Absorbed, yet hanging still upon the sound—  
And when I rose, I found myself in prayer.

1807

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This was the poem (later called *The Prelude*), addressed to Coleridge, that Wordsworth had completed in 1805. After Coleridge returned from Malta, very low in health and spirits, Wordsworth read the poem aloud to him during the evenings of almost two weeks. Coleridge wrote most of the present

response immediately after the reading was completed, on January 7, 1807.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Wordsworth had described the effect on his mind of the animating breeze (“vital breathings”) in *The Prelude* 1.1–47. “Thoughts . . . words” echoes the last line of Wordsworth’s “Intimations” ode. Coleridge goes on to summarize the major themes and events of *The Prelude*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sweet. Hybla, in ancient Sicily, was famous for its honey.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Probably alludes to “the great vision of the guarded mount” in Milton’s “Lycidas,” line 161.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: As enchanting and oracular as the song of the legendary Orpheus. There may also be an allusion to the Orphic mysteries, involving spiritual death and rebirth (see lines 61–66).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, during the early association between the two poets (1797–98).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A fabled bird, able to calm the sea where it nested in winter.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The evenings during which Wordsworth read his poem aloud.[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *song*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *springtime*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *awe-inspiring*[Return to reference °](#)

## Epitaph<sup>1</sup>

Stop, Christian Passer-by!—Stop, child of God,  
And read with gentle breast. Beneath this sod  
A poet lies, or that which once seem'd he.—  
O, lift one thought in prayer for S. T. C.;  
5 That he who many a year with toil of breath  
Found death in life, may here find life in death!  
Mercy for praise—to be forgiven for<sup>2</sup> fame  
He ask'd, and hoped, through Christ. Do thou the  
same!

1833

1834

### Endnotes

- Note 1: Written by Coleridge the year before he died. One version that he sent in a letter had as a title: "Epitaph on a Poet little known, yet better known by the Initials of his name than by the Name Itself."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "For" in the sense of "instead of" [*Coleridge's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)

**Biographia Literaria** In March 1815 Coleridge was preparing a collected edition of his poems and planned to include “a general preface . . . on the principles of philosophic and genial criticism.” As was typical for Coleridge, the materials developed as he worked on them until, on July 29, he declared that the preface had expanded to become a book in its own right, an “Autobiographia Literaria.” In a characteristic Romantic reinvention of autobiography, the work merged personal experience with philosophical speculation, as well as with what Coleridge identified as “digression and anecdotes.” It was to consist of two main parts, “my literary life and opinions, as far as poetry and *poetical* criticism [are] concerned” and a critique of Wordsworth’s theory of poetic diction. This work was ready by September 17, 1815, but the *Biographia Literaria*, in two volumes, was not published until July 1817. The delay was caused by a series of miscalculations by his printer, which forced Coleridge to add 150 pages of miscellaneous materials to pad out the length of the second volume.

Coleridge had been planning a detailed critique of Wordsworth’s theory of poetic diction ever since 1802, when he had detected “a radical difference in our theoretical opinions respecting poetry.” In the selection from [chapter 17](#), Coleridge agrees with Wordsworth’s general aim of reforming the artifices of current poetic diction, but he sharply denies Wordsworth’s claim that there is no essential difference between the language of poetry and the language spoken by people in real life. The other selections printed here are devoted mainly to the central principle of Coleridge’s own critical theory, the distinction between the mechanical “fancy” and the organic imagination, which is tersely summarized in the conclusion to chapter 13. The definition of poetry at the end of chapter 14 develops at greater length the nature of the “synthetic and magical power . . . of imagination,” which, for Coleridge, has the capacity to dissolve the divisions (between, for instance, the perceiving human subject and his or her objects of perception) that characterize human beings’ fallen state.

For another selection from *Biographia Literaria*, see “The Gothic and the Development of a Mass Readership,” [p. 313](#), above.

## ***From* Biographia Literaria**



**From *Chapter 4***

## [MR. WORDSWORTH'S EARLIER POEMS]

\* \* \* During the last year of my residence at Cambridge, I became acquainted with Mr. Wordsworth's first publication, entitled *Descriptive Sketches*;<sup>1</sup> and seldom, if ever, was the emergence of an original poetic genius above the literary horizon more evidently announced. In the form, style, and manner of the whole poem, and in the structure of the particular lines and periods, there is a harshness and acerbity connected and combined with words and images all a-glow which might recall those products of the vegetable world, where gorgeous blossoms rise out of the hard and thorny rind and shell within which the rich fruit was elaborating. The language was not only peculiar and strong, but at times knotty and contorted, as by its own impatient strength; while the novelty and struggling crowd of images, acting in conjunction with the difficulties of the style, demanded always a greater closeness of attention than poetry (at all events than descriptive poetry) has a right to claim. It not seldom therefore justified the complaint of obscurity. In the following extract I have sometimes fancied that I saw an emblem of the poem itself and of the author's genius as it was then displayed:

'Tis storm; and hid in mist from hour to hour,  
All day the floods a deepening murmur pour;  
The sky is veiled, and every cheerful sight:  
Dark is the region as with coming night;  
And yet what frequent bursts of overpowering light!  
Triumphant on the bosom of the storm,  
Glances the fire-clad eagle's wheeling form;  
Eastward, in long perspective glittering, shine  
The wood-crowned cliffs that o'er the lake recline;  
Wide o'er the Alps a hundred streams unfold,  
At once to pillars turned that flame with gold;  
Behind his sail the peasant strives to shun  
The West, that burns like one dilated sun,

Where in a mighty crucible expire  
The mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire.<sup>2</sup>

The poetic Psyche, in its process to full development, undergoes as many changes as its Greek namesake, the butterfly.<sup>3</sup> And it is remarkable how soon genius clears and purifies itself from the faults and errors of its earliest products; faults which, in its earliest compositions, are the more obtrusive and confluent because, as heterogeneous elements which had only a temporary use, they constitute the very *ferment* by which themselves are carried off. Or we may compare them to some diseases, which must work on the humors and be thrown out on the surface in order to secure the patient from their future recurrence. I was in my twenty-fourth year when I had the happiness of knowing Mr. Wordsworth personally;<sup>4</sup> and, while memory lasts, I shall hardly forget the sudden effect produced on my mind by his recitation of a manuscript poem which still remains unpublished, but of which the stanza and tone of style were the same as those of *The Female Vagrant* as originally printed in the first volume of the *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>5</sup> There was here no mark of strained thought or forced diction, no crowd or turbulence of imagery, and, as the poet hath himself well described in his lines on revisiting the Wye,<sup>6</sup> manly reflection and human associations had given both variety and an additional interest to natural objects which in the passion and appetite of the first love they had seemed to him neither to need or permit. The occasional obscurities, which had risen from an imperfect control over the resources of his native language, had almost wholly disappeared, together with that worse defect of arbitrary and illogical phrases, at once hackneyed and fantastic, which hold so distinguished a place in the *technique* of ordinary poetry and will, more or less, alloy the earlier poems of the truest genius, unless the attention has been specifically directed to their worthlessness and incongruity. I did not perceive anything particular in the mere style of the poem alluded to during its recitation, except indeed such difference as was not separable from the thought and manner; and the Spenserian stanza which always,

more or less, recalls to the reader's mind Spenser's own style, would doubtless have authorized in my then opinion a more frequent descent to the phrases of ordinary life than could, without an ill effect, have been hazarded in the heroic couplet. It was not however the freedom from false taste, whether as to common defects or to those more properly his own, which made so unusual an impression on my feelings immediately, and subsequently on my judgment. It was the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world, around forms, incidents, and situations of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the luster, had dried up the sparkle and the dewdrops. "To find no contradiction in the union of old and new, to contemplate the Ancient of Days and all his works with feelings as fresh as if all had then sprang forth at the first creative fiat,"<sup>7</sup> characterizes the mind that feels the riddle of the world and may help to unravel it. To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar;

With sun and moon and stars throughout the year,  
And man and woman;<sup>8</sup>

this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talents. And therefore it is the prime merit of genius, and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them, and that freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental no less than of bodily convalescence. Who has not a thousand times seen snow fall on water? Who has not watched it with a new feeling from the time that he has read Burns' comparison of sensual pleasure

To snow that falls upon a river  
A moment white—then gone forever!<sup>9</sup>

In poems, equally as in philosophic disquisitions, genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty while it rescues the most admitted truths from the impotence caused by the very circumstance of their universal admission. Truths of all others the most awful and mysterious, yet being at the same time of universal interest, are too often considered as *so* true, that they lose all the life and efficiency of truth and lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul side by side with the most despised and exploded errors." *The Friend*, p. 76, no. 5.<sup>1</sup>

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Published 1793, the year before Coleridge left Cambridge; a long descriptive-meditative poem in closed couplets, recounting Wordsworth's walking tour in the Alps in 1790. Wordsworth describes the same tour in *The Prelude*, book 6.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *Descriptive Sketches* (1815 version), lines 332ff.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In Greek, Psyche is the common name for the soul and the butterfly [*Coleridge's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The meeting occurred in September 1795.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: *Salisbury Plain* (1793–94), which was left in manuscript until Wordsworth published a revised version in 1842 as "Guilt and Sorrow." An excerpt from *Salisbury Plain* was printed as "The Female Vagrant," in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," lines 76ff.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The first divine command: "Let there be light."[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Altered from Milton's sonnet "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner upon His Blindness."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Altered from Burns's "Tam o' Shanter," lines 61–62.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A periodical published by Coleridge (1809–10).[Return to reference 1](#)

## [ON FANCY AND IMAGINATION—THE INVESTIGATION OF THE DISTINCTION IMPORTANT TO THE FINE ARTS]

This excellence, which in all Mr. Wordsworth's writings is more or less predominant and which constitutes the character of his mind, I no sooner felt than I sought to understand. Repeated meditations led me first to suspect (and a more intimate analysis of the human faculties, their appropriate marks, functions, and effects, matured my conjecture into full conviction) that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or at furthest the lower and higher degree of one and the same power. It is not, I own, easy to conceive a more apposite translation of the Greek *phantasia* than the Latin *imaginatio*; but it is equally true that in all societies there exists an instinct of growth, a certain collective unconscious good sense working progressively to desynonymize those words originally of the same meaning which the conflux of dialects had supplied to the more homogeneous languages, as the Greek and German: and which the same cause, joined with accidents of translation from original works of different countries, occasion in mixed languages like our own. The first and most important point to be proved is, that two conceptions perfectly distinct are confused under one and the same word, and (this done) to appropriate that word exclusively to one meaning, and the synonym (should there be one) to the other. But if (as will be often the case in the arts and sciences) no synonym exists, we must either invent or borrow a word. In the present instance the appropriation had already begun and been legitimated in the derivative adjective: Milton had a highly *imaginative*, Cowley a very *fanciful*, mind. If therefore I should succeed in establishing the actual existence of two faculties generally different, the nomenclature would be at once determined. To the faculty by which I had characterized Milton we

should confine the term *imagination*; while the other would be contradistinguished as *fancy*. Now were it once fully ascertained that this division is no less grounded in nature than that of delirium from mania, or Otway's

Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk, and ships of amber,<sup>2</sup>  
from Shakespeare's

What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?<sup>3</sup>

or from the preceding apostrophe to the elements, the theory of the fine arts and of poetry in particular could not, I thought, but derive some additional and important light. It would in its immediate effects furnish a torch of guidance to the philosophical critic, and ultimately to the poet himself. In energetic minds truth soon changes by domestication into power; and from directing in the discrimination and appraisal of the product becomes influential in the production. To admire on principle is the only way to imitate without loss of originality. \* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Thomas Otway, in *Venice Preserved* (1682), wrote "laurels" in place of "lobsters" (5.2.151).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: *King Lear* 3.4.59.[Return to reference 3](#)



## From *Chapter 13*

### [ON THE IMAGINATION, OR ESEMPLASTIC<sup>4</sup> POWER]

\* \* \* The IMAGINATION, then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.<sup>5</sup> \* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 4: Coleridge coined this word and used it to mean "molding into unity."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Coleridge conceives God's creation to be a continuing process, which has an analogy in the creative perception ("primary imagination") of all human minds. The creative process is repeated, or "echoed," on still a third level, by the "secondary imagination" of the poet, which dissolves the products of primary perception to shape them into a new and

unified creation—the imaginative passage or poem. The “fancy,” on the other hand, can only manipulate “fixities and definites” that, linked by association, come to it ready-made from perception. [Return to reference 5](#)

## Chapter 14

### **OCCASION OF *THE LYRICAL BALLADS*, AND THE OBJECTS ORIGINALLY PROPOSED—PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION—THE ENSUING CONTROVERSY, ITS CAUSES AND ACRIMONY—PHILOSOPHIC DEFINITIONS OF A POEM AND POETRY WITH SCHOLIA.<sup>6</sup>**

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours,<sup>7</sup> our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination.<sup>8</sup> The sudden charm which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in *this* sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them when they present themselves.

In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.<sup>9</sup>

With this view I wrote *The Ancient Mariner*, and was preparing, among other poems, *The Dark Ladie*, and the *Christabel*, in which I should have more nearly realized my ideal than I had done in my first attempt. But Mr. Wordsworth's industry had proved so much more successful and the number of his poems so much greater, that my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Wordsworth added two or three poems written in his own character, in the impassioned, lofty, and sustained diction which is characteristic of his genius. In this form the *Lyrical Ballads* were published; and were presented by him, as an *experiment*,<sup>2</sup> whether subjects which from their nature rejected the usual ornaments and extra-colloquial style of poems in general might not be so managed in the language of ordinary life as to produce the pleasurable interest which it is the peculiar business of poetry to impart. To the second edition<sup>3</sup> he added a preface of considerable length; in which, notwithstanding some passages of apparently a contrary import, he was understood to contend for the extension of this style to poetry of all kinds, and to reject as vicious and indefensible all phrases and forms of style that were not included in what he (unfortunately, I think, adopting an equivocal expression) called the language of *real* life. From this preface,

prefixed to poems in which it was impossible to deny the presence of original genius, however mistaken its direction might be deemed, arose the whole long-continued controversy.<sup>4</sup> For from the conjunction of perceived power with supposed heresy I explain the inveteracy<sup>5</sup> and in some instances, I grieve to say, the acrimonious passions with which the controversy has been conducted by the assailants.

Had Mr. Wordsworth's poems been the silly, the childish things which they were for a long time described as being; had they been really distinguished from the compositions of other poets merely by meanness<sup>6</sup> of language and inanity of thought; had they indeed contained nothing more than what is found in the parodies and pretended imitations of them; they must have sunk at once, a dead weight, into the slough of oblivion, and have dragged the preface along with them. But year after year increased the number of Mr. Wordsworth's admirers. They were found too not in the lower classes of the reading public, but chiefly among young men of strong sensibility and meditative minds; and their admiration (inflamed perhaps in some degree by opposition) was distinguished by its intensity, I might almost say, by its *religious* fervor. These facts, and the intellectual energy of the author, which was more or less consciously felt where it was outwardly and even boisterously denied, meeting with sentiments of aversion to his opinions and of alarm at their consequences, produced an eddy of criticism which would of itself have borne up the poems by the violence with which it whirled them round and round. With many parts of this preface, in the sense attributed to them and which the words undoubtedly seem to authorize, I never concurred; but, on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle, and as contradictory (in appearance at least) both to other parts of the same preface and to the author's own practice in the greater number of the poems themselves. Mr. Wordsworth in his recent collection<sup>7</sup> has, I find, degraded this prefatory disquisition to the end of his second volume, to be read or not at the reader's choice. But he has not, as far as I can discover, announced any change in his poetic creed. At all events, considering

it as the source of a controversy in which I have been honored more than I deserve by the frequent conjunction of my name with his, I think it expedient to declare once for all in what points I coincide with his opinions, and in what points I altogether differ. But in order to render myself intelligible I must previously, in as few words as possible, explain my ideas, first, of a POEM; and secondly, of POETRY itself, in *kind* and in *essence*.

The office of philosophical *disquisition* consists in just *distinction*; while it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware that distinction is not division. In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical of philosophy. But having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity in which they actually coexist; and this is the *result* of philosophy. A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed. According to the difference of the object will be the difference of the combination. It is possible that the object may be merely to facilitate the recollection of any given facts or observations by artificial arrangement; and the composition will be a poem, merely because it is distinguished from prose by meter, or by rhyme, or by both conjointly. In this, the lowest sense, a man might attribute the name of a poem to the well-known enumeration of the days in the several months:

Thirty days hath September,  
April, June, and November, etc.

and others of the same class and purpose. And as a particular pleasure is found in anticipating the recurrence of sounds and quantities, all compositions that have this charm superadded, whatever be their contents, *may* be entitled poems.

So much for the superficial *form*. A difference of object and contents supplies an additional ground of distinction. The immediate

purpose may be the communication of truths; either of truth absolute and demonstrable, as in works of science; or of facts experienced and recorded, as in history. Pleasure, and that of the highest and most permanent kind, may *result* from the *attainment* of the end; but it is not itself the immediate end. In other works the communication of pleasure may be the immediate purpose; and though truth, either moral or intellectual, ought to be the *ultimate* end, yet this will distinguish the character of the author, not the class to which the work belongs. Blessed indeed is that state of society in which the immediate purpose would be baffled by the perversion of the proper ultimate end; in which no charm of diction or imagery could exempt the Bathyllus even of an Anacreon, or the Alexis of Virgil,<sup>8</sup> from disgust and aversion!

But the communication of pleasure may be the immediate object of a work not metrically composed; and that object may have been in a high degree attained, as in novels and romances. Would then the mere superaddition of meter, with or without rhyme, entitle *these* to the name of poems? The answer is that nothing can permanently please which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise. If meter be superadded, all other parts must be made consonant with it. They must be such as to justify the perpetual and distinct attention to each part which an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound are calculated to excite. The final definition then, so deduced, may be thus worded. A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole* as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*.

Controversy is not seldom excited in consequence of the disputants attaching each a different meaning to the same word; and in few instances has this been more striking than in disputes concerning the present subject. If a man chooses to call every composition a poem which is rhyme, or measure, or both, I must leave his opinion uncontroverted. The distinction is at least

competent to characterize the writer's intention. If it were subjoined that the whole is likewise entertaining or affecting as a tale or as a series of interesting reflections, I of course admit this as another fit ingredient of a poem and an additional merit. But if the definition sought for be that of a *legitimate* poem, I answer it must be one the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement. The philosophic critics of all ages coincide with the ultimate judgment of all countries in equally denying the praises of a just poem on the one hand to a series of striking lines or distichs,<sup>9</sup> each of which absorbing the whole attention of the reader to itself disjoins it from its context and makes it a separate whole, instead of a harmonizing part; and on the other hand, to an unsustained composition, from which the reader collects rapidly the general result unattracted by the component parts. The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. "*Praecipitandus est liber spiritus*,"<sup>1</sup> says Petronius Arbiter most happily. The epithet *liber* here balances the preceding verb; and it is not easy to conceive more meaning condensed in fewer words.

But if this should be admitted as a satisfactory character of a poem, we have still to seek for a definition of poetry. The writings of Plato, and Bishop Taylor, and the *Theoria Sacra* of Burnet,<sup>2</sup> furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without meter, and even without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem. The first chapter of Isaiah (indeed a very large proportion of the whole book) is poetry in the most emphatic sense; yet it would be not less irrational than strange to assert that pleasure, and not truth, was the immediate object of the prophet. In short, whatever *specific*



import we attach to the word poetry, there will be found involved in it, as a necessary consequence, that a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry. Yet if a harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved in *keeping*<sup>3</sup> with the poetry; and this can be no otherwise effected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement as will partake of *one*, though not a *peculiar*, property of poetry. And this again can be no other than the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written.

My own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination. What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding and retained under their irremissive,<sup>4</sup> though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis*)<sup>5</sup> reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities:<sup>6</sup> of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. "Doubtless," as Sir John Davies

observes of the soul (and his words may with slight alteration be applied, and even more appropriately, to the poetic IMAGINATION):

Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns  
Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange,  
As fire converts to fire the things it burns,  
As we our food into our nature change.

From their gross matter she abstracts their forms,  
And draws a kind of quintessence from things;  
Which to her proper nature she transforms,  
To bear them light on her celestial wings.

Thus does she, when from individual states  
She doth abstract the universal kinds;  
Which then reclothed in divers names and fates  
Steal access through our senses to our minds.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, GOOD SENSE is the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY,<sup>8</sup> MOTION its LIFE, and IMAGINATION the SOUL that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

## Endnotes

- Note 6: Additional remarks, after a philosophic demonstration.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: At Nether Stowey and Alfoxden, Somerset, in 1797.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Compare Wordsworth's account in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (p. 338, above).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Compare Isaiah 6:9–10.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published anonymously in 1798, contained nineteen poems by Wordsworth, four by Coleridge.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: *Experiments* was the word used by Wordsworth in his Advertisement to the first edition.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Published in 1800.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The controversy over Wordsworth's theory and poetical practice in the literary reviews of the day.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Deep-rooted prejudice.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Vulgarity.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: *Poems*, 2 vols., 1815.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The reference is to poems of same-sex love. Bathyllus was a beautiful boy praised by Anacreon, a Greek lyric poet (ca. 560–475 B.C.E.); Alexis was a young man loved by the shepherd Corydon in Virgil's *Eclogue* 2.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Pairs of lines.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: "The *free* spirit [of the poet] must be hurled onward." From the *Satyricon*, by the Roman satirist Petronius Arbiter (1st century C.E.).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Thomas Burnet (1635?–1715), author of *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*. Bishop Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667), author of *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*. Coleridge greatly admired the elaborate and sonorous prose of both these writers. He took from a work by Burnet the Latin motto for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A term from the theory of painting for the maintenance of the harmony of a composition.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Continuous.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: It is driven with loosened reins (Latin).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Here Coleridge introduces the concept, which became central to the American New Critics of the mid-20th century, that the best poetry incorporates and reconciles opposite or discordant elements.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Adapted from John Davies's *Nosce Teipsum* ("Know Thyself"), a philosophical poem (1599).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Clothing.[Return to reference 8](#)

**From *Chapter 17***

## [EXAMINATION OF THE TENETS PECULIAR TO MR. WORDSWORTH]

As far then as Mr. Wordsworth in his preface contended, and most ably contended, for a reformation in our poetic diction, as far as he has evinced the truth of passion, and the *dramatic* propriety of those figures and metaphors in the original poets which, stripped of their justifying reasons and converted into mere artifices of connection or ornament, constitute the characteristic falsity in the poetic style of the moderns; and as far as he has, with equal acuteness and clearness, pointed out the process by which this change was effected and the resemblances between that state into which the reader's mind is thrown by the pleasurable confusion of thought from an unaccustomed train of words and images and that state which is induced by the natural language of impassioned feeling, he undertook a useful task and deserves all praise, both for the attempt and for the execution. The provocations to this remonstrance in behalf of truth and nature were still of perpetual recurrence before and after the publication of this preface. \* \* \*

My own differences from certain supposed parts of Mr. Wordsworth's theory ground themselves on the assumption that his words had been rightly interpreted, as purporting that the proper diction for poetry in general consists altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life, a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings.<sup>9</sup> My objection is, first, that in *any* sense this rule is applicable only to *certain* classes of poetry; secondly, that even to these classes it is not applicable, except in such a sense as hath never by anyone (as far as I know or have read) been denied or doubted; and, lastly, that as far as, and in that degree in which it is *practicable*, yet as a *rule* it is useless, if not injurious, and therefore either need not or ought not to be practiced. \* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 9: Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800, 1802): "A selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation. . . . Low and rustic life was generally chosen. . . . The language, too, of these men is adopted."[Return to reference 9](#)

**[RUSTIC LIFE (ABOVE ALL, *LOW* AND RUSTIC LIFE)  
ESPECIALLY UNFAVORABLE TO THE FORMATION OF A  
HUMAN DICTION—THE BEST PARTS OF LANGUAGE  
THE PRODUCTS OF PHILOSOPHERS, NOT CLOWNS<sup>1</sup>  
OR SHEPHERDS]**

As little can I agree with the assertion that from the objects with which the rustic hourly communicates the best part of language is formed. For first, if to communicate with an object implies such an acquaintance with it, as renders it capable of being discriminately reflected on; the distinct knowledge of an uneducated rustic would furnish a very scanty vocabulary. The few things, and modes of action, requisite for his bodily conveniences, would alone be individualized; while all the rest of nature would be expressed by a small number of confused general terms. Secondly, I deny that the words and combinations of words derived from the objects, with which the rustic is familiar, whether with distinct or confused knowledge, can be justly said to form the *best* part of language. It is more than probable that many classes of the brute creation possess discriminating sounds, by which they can convey to each other notices of such objects as concern their food, shelter, or safety. Yet we hesitate to call the aggregate of such sounds a language, otherwise than metaphorically. The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man; though in civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed or reaped. \* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Rustic people. [Return to reference 1](#)



## [THE LANGUAGE OF MILTON AS MUCH THE LANGUAGE OF *REAL* LIFE, YEA, INCOMPARABLY MORE SO THAN THAT OF THE COTTAGER]

Here let me be permitted to remind the reader that the positions which I controvert are contained in the sentences—"a selection of the *REAL* language of men"; "the language of these men (i.e., men in low and rustic life) I propose to myself to imitate, and as far as possible to adopt the very language of men." "Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition there neither is, nor can be any essential difference." It is against these exclusively that my opposition is directed.

I object, in the very first instance, to an equivocation in the use of the word "real." Every man's language varies according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Every man's language has, first, its *individualities*; secondly, the common properties of the *class* to which he belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of *universal* use. The language of Hooker, Bacon, Bishop Taylor, and Burke<sup>2</sup> differs from the common language of the learned class only by the superior number and novelty of the thoughts and relations which they had to convey. The language of Algernon Sidney<sup>3</sup> differs not at all from that which every well-educated gentleman would wish to write, and (with due allowances for the undeliberateness and less connected train of thinking natural and proper to conversation) such as he would wish to talk. Neither one nor the other differ half as much from the general language of cultivated society as the language of Mr. Wordsworth's homeliest composition differs from that of a common peasant. For "real" therefore we must substitute *ordinary*, or *lingua communis*.<sup>4</sup> And this, we have proved, is no more to be found in the phraseology of low and rustic life than in that of any other class. Omit the peculiarities of each, and the result of course must be common to all. And assuredly the omissions and changes to be

made in the language of rustics before it could be transferred to any species of poem, except the drama or other professed imitation, are at least as numerous and weighty as would be required in adapting to the same purpose the ordinary language of tradesmen and manufacturers. Not to mention that the language so highly extolled by Mr. Wordsworth varies in every county, nay, in every village, according to the accidental character of the clergyman, the existence or nonexistence of schools; or even, perhaps, as the exciseman, publican, or barber happen to be, or not to be, zealous politicians and readers of the weekly newspaper *pro bono publico*.<sup>5</sup> Anterior to cultivation the *lingua communis* of every country, as Dante has well observed, exists every where in parts and no where as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Neither is the case rendered at all more tenable by the addition of the words "in a state of excitement."<sup>7</sup> For the nature of a man's words, when he is strongly affected by joy, grief, or anger, must necessarily depend on the number and quality of the general truths, conceptions, and images, and of the words expressing them, with which his mind had been previously stored. For the property of passion is not to *create*, but to set in increased activity. At least, whatever new connections of thoughts or images, or (which is equally, if not more than equally, the appropriate effect of strong excitement) whatever generalizations of truth or experience the heat of passion may produce, yet the terms of their conveyance must have pre-existed in his former conversations, and are only collected and crowded together by the unusual stimulation. It is indeed very possible to adopt in a poem the unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters which an unfurnished or confused understanding interposes at short intervals in order to keep hold of his subject which is still slipping from him, and to give him time for recollection; or in mere aid of vacancy, as in the scanty companies of a country stage the same player pops backwards and forwards, in order to prevent the appearance of empty spaces, in the procession of *Macbeth* or *Henry VIIIth*. But what assistance to the poet or ornament to the poem these can supply, I am at a loss to conjecture. Nothing assuredly can differ either in origin or in mode

more widely from the apparent tautologies of intense and turbulent feeling in which the passion is greater and of longer endurance than to be exhausted or satisfied by a single representation of the image or incident exciting it. Such repetitions I admit to be a beauty of the highest kind; as illustrated by Mr. Wordsworth himself from the song of Deborah. "At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down; at her feet he bowed, he fell; where he bowed, there he fell down dead."<sup>8</sup>

1815

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Richard Hooker (1554–1600), author of *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), essayist and philosopher, and Jeremy Taylor were all, together with the late 18th-century politician and opponent of the French Revolution Edmund Burke (1729–1797), lauded for their prose styles.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Republican soldier and statesman (1622–1683), author of *Discourses Concerning Government*, executed for his part in the Rye House Plot to assassinate Charles II.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The common language (Latin).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: For the public welfare (Latin).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (*On the Speech of the People*) Dante discusses—and affirms—the fitness for poetry of the unlocalized Italian vernacular.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Wordsworth: "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Judges 5:27. Cited by Wordsworth in a note to *The Thorn* as an example of the natural repetitiousness of "impassioned feelings."[Return to reference 8](#)

# Slavery and the Literature of Abolition

Late eighteenth-century Britons prided themselves on how their constitution safeguarded individual liberty. Yet their economy depended increasingly on wealth obtained through the enslavement of others. Members of Parliament and even the missionary arm of the Anglican Church numbered among the absentee owners of Caribbean plantations that exploited the labor of enslaved Africans. The maritime industries of Bristol and Liverpool were heavily involved in procuring this labor supply. Beginning in the seventeenth century, a “triangular trade” had been established, which saw ships sail to the west coast of Africa to buy or kidnap human cargo, voyage across the Atlantic to the New World where those slaves would be sold at a tremendous premium, and then, in the third leg of the triangle, return to Britain carrying the colonial goods that fed Europeans’ growing appetites for tobacco, rum, and sugar. By the 1790s more than 40,000 Africans annually were being packed into British slave ships. The mortality rate for these people during the horrific Middle Passage has been estimated at one in six. One-third died within three years of disembarking in the West Indies, from tropical diseases or the mistreatment and sexual abuse meted out to them on the plantations.

Through the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, those few British people who had considered these evils at all had for the most part rationalized them away. Slavery seemed simply the cost of doing business in the New World, and the West Indian planters’ rights to secure possession of their property, even property in persons, appeared beyond challenge. The link between slave labor and the consumer pleasures that defined their daily lives escaped most people’s notice. “How little think the giddy and the gay / While sipping o’er the sweets of charming tea, / . . . How oft their lux’ry

robs the wretch of rest," lamented one Mary Birkett in her 1789 poem on the slave trade. Whereas across the Atlantic the White settlers of the southern United States and the White elites of the Sugar Islands were outnumbered and continually anxious, with reason, that the enslaved might revolt and avenge their wrongs, White Britons, by contrast, contrived to enjoy the fruits of slavery without meditating on its costs.

The movement for abolishing the slave trade that was launched in the 1780s challenged that willful ignorance. The abolitionists mobilized the power that the stories and poems they distributed had to break down the boundaries between "out there" and "in here"; they brought distant suffering and violence home. Almost every major poet working in the late eighteenth century wrote for their cause. (For proslavery writers, by contrast, prose was overwhelmingly the medium of choice.) In amassing, in an often lurid idiom, a dossier of national crime, this literature changed how the public thought about collective moral responsibility. It also evidenced the power that might accrue to those who harnessed the emergent force of mass literacy.

At its 1787 launch the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves comprised only a small circle: Thomas Clarkson, most famously, the lawyer Granville Sharp, the Quaker publisher James Phillips, and a few others. Nonetheless, abolitionism fast became a popular movement. That same year, two-thirds of the adult male population of Manchester signed petitions calling on Parliament to investigate the trade. Later 300,000 families pledged to abstain from purchasing Caribbean sugar. Though marginalized by later historians, members of Britain's Black community, an impoverished group who at this time numbered ten to fifteen thousand, also found public voices in the struggle. There were Black writers such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano and, before them, figures such as James Somerset, the enslaved man who had the audacity to test White men's law and so force the judiciary to declare outright, in the *Mansfield Judgement* of 1772, that in fact there was no legal basis for slavery on English ground.

It was difficult for these activists to parlay altered public opinion into legislative action. William Wilberforce, the society's chief representative in Parliament, was consistently outmaneuvered by proslavery politicians, who variously dismissed the witnesses he introduced, cited biblical precedents legitimizing modern slavery, or insisted that, thanks to their owners' benevolent care, West Indian slaves were better off than British laborers. His motions for abolition were repeatedly voted down or allowed to die in committee, defeats bitterly memorialized in Anna Letitia Barbauld's 1791 poem "Epistle to William Wilberforce" (on [p. 45](#), above). The radical turn that revolutionary activity in France took in the 1790s proved another setback. Proslavery agitators seized the opportunity to portray abolition as dangerous to social stability. The petitioning among White British subjects that had occurred in the early stages of the abolitionist campaigning looked different in this altered context: a menacing attempt on the part of the governed to overawe their rightful governors. Then revolution in the French sugar colony of St.-Domingue (modern Haiti), led by the formerly enslaved commanders Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Toussaint Louverture, occasioned a new racist demonology: the carnage was decried as the inevitable consequence of recklessly introducing primitive minds to modern politics' "schemes of perfection." (See [pp. 215–28](#), above.)

Nonetheless, subsequent events made apparent the penalties Britain would pay for continued support of colonial slavery. The few British soldiers who survived their tours of duty in the West Indies during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars returned with news of just how resolute an enemy enslaved people seeking their freedom could be. Napoleon's reintroduction of slavery into the French Empire in 1802 enabled supporters of abolition to parry the suggestion that the disruption of this lucrative British industry would aid Britain's commercial rivals: instead they could link support for their cause to the war effort. In 1807 Parliament at last voted for the slave trade's abolition.

Wishfully, Wilberforce, Clarkson, and their associates had proposed that with the ending of the trade, slavery itself would

disappear in due course. Many who opposed slavery as an institution felt advocating for legislation abolishing it outright was politically naïve; some contended an extended transition between slavery and emancipation would be preferable to abrupt change. Bloodily suppressed uprisings in Barbados (1816), Guyana (1823), and Jamaica (1831) were cited not only by pro-slavery writers but also by abolitionists who continued to argue, paternalistically, that enslaved populations were not yet ready for freedom: in an 1824 speech in Parliament, Foreign Secretary George Canning drew on Mary Shelley's novel, or likely its 1823 stage adaptation, to compare calls for immediate emancipation to Frankenstein's irresponsible creation of an out-of-control monster. A "gradualist" approach was built into the original title of the most prominent abolitionist organization of the 1820s and '30s: though it became popularly known as the London Anti-Slavery Society, it was founded in 1823 by leading campaigners including Wilberforce and Clarkson as the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions.

At the same time, more radical voices, coming from a variety of social and political positions, were making impassioned cases that slavery was a moral crime of such magnitude that to wait on reform or gradual change was itself criminal. To those impatient with gradualism, the successive rebellions in slave colonies were inevitable and understandable, evidence of the urgency of the cause. Operating in the scruffy milieu of London working-class radicalism, the Jamaica-born Black activist Robert Wedderburn linked the plights of English laborers and enslaved West Indians, provocatively representing both groups as political actors capable of organizing and overthrowing oppressive systems (testing the limits of permissible speech, Wedderburn was arrested in 1819 and sentenced in 1820 to two years' jail time for blasphemy and sedition). A different kind of transatlantic connection developed in the 1820s and '30s as "immediatism" gained traction among evangelicals, Quakers, and other Protestant congregations in both Britain and America, and especially through an international network

of women's antislavery societies, whose members engaged in extensive door-to-door canvassing to spread information and gain support. With legislative avenues in Parliament apparently blocked, they advocated alternative means of action through consumer boycotts and other pressure campaigns.

By the early 1830s, abolitionist strategy would shift considerably in favor of immediate emancipation. Graphic accounts of slavery's cruelties, including Mary Prince's autobiographical testimony of her harrowing experiences of enslavement in Bermuda (1831), helped move public opinion. After the 1832 reform of Parliament reduced the number of votes controlled by the West Indian interests, an Emancipation Bill was finally enacted in 1834—though even that mandated a period of gradual emancipation for slaves over six years old, while also richly compensating slaveholders for their "losses." (Full emancipation came in 1838.) British writers continued to contribute to antislavery activism after this point, with the focus now turned to the United States, where emancipation would of course not come until the Civil War.

The strategies for depicting violence, suffering, and retaliation that anti- and proslavery writers developed over the course of this long debate altered the cultural landscape. The influence of their writings is discernible throughout Romantic literature, in Romantic authors' apocalyptic imaginings, explorations of themes of guilt and confession, interest in the workings of pity, and consciousness of how language can fail in the face of atrocity. The texts that follow suggest the variety of moves writers made to galvanize the attention of the reading public.



## JOHN NEWTON

John Newton (1725–1807) is remembered today as the author of “Amazing Grace,” a beautiful hymn interwoven in complex ways with the history of slavery. By 1852 the hymn was so important to the tradition of African American gospel music that the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe arranged for her enslaved hero in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to sing it at a moment of despondency. There is a second, conflicting way, though, in which “Amazing Grace” is linked to the history of slavery—through the biography of its author. When in 1779 Newton wrote “Faith’s Review and Expectation” (as “Amazing Grace” was originally titled), he was already a celebrity minister in the Anglican Church, famous for the narrative of his spiritual awakening he had published in 1764. He was also a former captain of a slave ship, who during the 1750s had made three voyages down Africa’s windward coast, doing so *after* his conversion. Late in life, Newton looked back at his slaver past a second time as he stepped forth in print as a champion of abolition. To read “Amazing Grace” alongside this book *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (1788), which Newton presented as his act of “public confession,” is to see how Evangelical Christianity’s themes of sin and redemption provided a framework for the abolitionists’ political engagement. It suggests how the abolitionists’ preoccupation with their own spiritual welfare would overshadow sometimes their consciousness of African suffering.

## Faith's Review and Expectation (Amazing Grace)

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)  
That sav'd a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

5 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears reliev'd;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believ'd!

10 Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.

15 The Lord has promis'd good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be,  
As long as life endures.

20 Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,  
And mortal life shall cease;  
I shall possess, within the vail,  
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun forbear to shine;  
But God who call'd me here below,  
Will be for ever mine.

## THOMAS CLARKSON

Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846) was merely seeking academic honors when he chanced to enter a Latin composition contest on the topic of slavery. However, the evidence the recent Cambridge graduate gathered to prepare his essay shocked him deeply. He won the prize and had an epiphany: “A thought came into my mind,” he wrote, looking back in his riveting *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave-Trade* (1808), “that if the contents of the Essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end.” Forgoing the church career that awaited him, Clarkson arranged to publish an English version of his essay and began traveling. This determined activist would cover 35,000 miles on horseback over the following seven years. He scoured England for witnesses who might testify to the suffering that slavery inflicted on its victims, a group that for Clarkson, as for Newton, included the working-class seamen who were often “impressed”—recruited by force—into its service. Sometimes at great risk to himself (the Liverpool merchants wanted him dead), he assembled the first comprehensive account of the slave trade. Whether by excavating ships’ muster rolls stored in London’s Custom House or inventorying the shackles, thumbscrews, and instruments for force feeding that he found for sale in Liverpool marine supply shops, Clarkson empowered abolitionism with hard facts. Clarkson’s genius, however, also lay in his realization that antislavery writing would need to tap the resources of imaginative literature so as to bring those facts from faraway up close and prompt readers to reimagine themselves as witnesses to slavery’s atrocities. Pivoting on what the author calls an “Imaginary scene in Africa” and an “Imaginary conversation with an African,” the first text reprinted here, from the opening of part III of Clarkson’s *Essay* (the revised 1788 edition), suggests his technique. In the second excerpt from his *Essay*, Clarkson first details the “accommodation” that the

enslaved people experienced during the Middle Passage and then tells the story of a particular voyage: that of the *Zong*, whose captain in September 1781 ordered more than a hundred enslaved Africans thrown overboard so that the ship's owners could collect on the insurance policy they had taken out on their cargo.

***From* Essay on the Slavery and Commerce  
of the Human Species**

**From *Part III, Chapter 1* ("*Imaginary conversation with an African*")**

\* \* \*

I shall suppose myself on a particular part of the continent of Africa, and relate a scene, which, from its agreement with unquestionable facts, might not unreasonably be presumed to have been presented to my view, had I been actually there.

And first, I will turn my eyes to the cloud of dust that is before me. It seems to advance rapidly, and, accompanied with dismal shrieks and yellings, to make the very air, that is above it, tremble as it rolls along. What can possibly be the cause? I will inquire of that melancholy African, who is walking dejected upon the shore; whose eyes are stedfastly fixed on the approaching object, and whose heart, if I can judge from the appearance of his countenance, must be greatly agitated.

"Alas!" says the the unhappy African, "the cloud that you see approaching, rises from a train of wretched slaves. They are going to the ships behind you. They are destined for the English colonies, and, if you will stay here but for a little time, you will see them pass. They arrived here about two days ago from the inland country. I saw the fleet come in, which had gone to fetch them, and, upon looking into the different canoes, found them lying at the bottom, their hands and feet being tied together. As soon as they were landed, they were conveyed to the houses of the black traders, which you see at a little distance, where they were immediately oiled, and fed, and made up for sale." \* \* \*

We then discovered that the inhabitants of the depopulated village had all of them passed us, and that the part of the train, to which we were now opposite, was a body of kidnapped people. Here we indulged our imagination. We thought we beheld in one of them a father, in another an husband, and in another a son, each of whom was forced from his various and tender connections, and without

even the opportunity of bidding them adieu. While we were engaged in these and other melancholy reflections, the whole body of slaves had intirely passed us. We turned almost insensibly to look at them again, when we discovered an unhappy man at the end of the train, who could scarcely keep pace with the rest. His feet seemed to have suffered much, either from the fetters, which had confined them in the canoe, or from long and constant travelling, for he was limping painfully along.

"This man," resumes the African, "has travelled a considerable way. He lived at a great distance from hence, and had a large family, for whom he was daily to provide. As he went out one night to a neighbouring spring, to procure water for his thirsty children, he was kidnapped by two *slave-hunters*, who sold him in the morning to some country merchants for a *bar of iron*. These drove him with other slaves, procured almost in the same manner, to the nearest market, where some of the travelling traders purchased him for a *pistol*. These handed him down to the fair, from whence the canoes fetched him. His wife and children have been long waiting for his return. But he is gone for ever from their sight: and they must be now disconsolate, being certain by his delay, that he must have fallen into the hands of the *Christians*."

"And now, as I have mentioned the name of *Christians*, a name, by which the Europeans distinguish themselves from us, I could wish to be informed of the meaning which such an appellation may convey. They consider themselves as *men*, but us unfortunate Africans, whom they term *Heathens*, as the beasts that serve us. But ah! how different is the fact! What is *Christianity*, but a system of *murder* and *oppression*? The cries and yells of the unfortunate people, who are now soon to embark for the regions of servitude, have already pierced my heart. Have you not heard me sigh while we have been talking? Do you not see the tears that now trickle down my cheeks? and yet these hardened *Christians* are unable to be moved at all: nay, they will scourge them amidst their groans, and even smile, while they are torturing them to death. Happy,

happy Heathenism! which can detest the vices of Christianity, and feel for the distresses of mankind."

"But" I reply, "You are totally mistaking: *Christianity* is the most perfect and lovely of moral systems. It blesses even the hand of persecution itself, and returns good for evil. But the people against whom you so justly declaim, are not *Christians*. They are *infidels*. They are *monsters*. They are out of the common course of nature. Their countrymen at home are generous and brave. They support the sick, the lame, and the blind. They fly to the succour of the distressed. They have noble and stately buildings for the sole purpose of benevolence. They are in short, of all nations, the most remarkable for humanity and justice."

"But why then," replies the honest African, "do they suffer this? Why is Africa a scene of blood and desolation? Why are her children wrested from her, to administer to the luxuries and greatness of those whom they never offended? And why are these dismal cries in vain?"

"Alas!" I reply again, "can the cries and groans, with which the air now trembles, be heard across this extensive continent? Can the southern winds convey them to the ear of Britain? If they could reach the generous Englishman at home, they would pierce his heart, as they have already pierced your own. He would sympathize with you in your distress. He would be enraged at the conduct of his countrymen, and resist their tyranny."—

But here a shriek unusually loud, accompanied with a dreadful rattling of chains, interrupted the discourse. \* \* \*



**From *Part III, Chapter 3* ("*The dimensions of a slave vessel*"  
*and the Zong Incident*)**

\* \* \*

As much has been said by the advocates for this trade, of the accommodation which slaves experience during the middle passage, I shall say a few words on that head.

The height of their apartments varies of course according to the size of the vessel, but may be stated to be from six feet to less than three; so that it is impossible for them to stand erect in most of the vessels that transport them, and in some scarcely to sit down in the same posture.

In cases of this kind it is better to be explicit, and to mention particular facts. I shall therefore give the reader the dimensions of two vessels that sailed about six months ago, from a British port to the Coast of Africa, for slaves. I do not mean as tenders<sup>1</sup> to other ships, but to collect them on their own account, and to carry them to the colonies.

One of them was a vessel of *twenty-five* tons. The length of the upper part of the hold, or roof of the rooms where the slaves were to be confined, was thirty-one feet. The greatest breadth of the bottom or floor, was ten feet four inches, and the least five. The depth or height, was rather less than four. This vessel was calculated, and sailed for *seventy* slaves.

It is clear that none of the unfortunate people, perhaps at this moment on board, can stand upright, but that they must sit down, and contract their limbs within the limits of little more than three square feet, during the whole of the middle passage. I cannot compare the scene on board this vessel, to any other than that of a pen of sheep; with this difference only, that the one have the advantages of a wholesome air, while that, which the others breathe, is putrid.

The other vessel measured *eleven* tons. The length of the apartment for the slaves was twenty-two feet. The greatest breadth of the floor eight, and the least four. The depth was two feet eight inches. This vessel was calculated and sailed for *thirty* slaves.

Any person of a moderate height, standing upon dry ground, by the side of this vessel, might overlook every thing upon the deck; as her height from the keel to the beam was but five feet eight inches, three of which were engrossed by ballast, cargo, and provisions, and the rest was left for—*slaves*.

The only idea, that will perhaps strike the reader, in examining these dimensions, will be, that the apartment must be in shape and size, as well as in heat, similar to an *oven*. I know of no other object of just comparison; and to shew how preposterously the advocates for slavery talk, when they declaim upon the accommodations for slaves; this very *boat* was built for the pleasure and convenience of about *six* free people upon the Severn.<sup>2</sup>

If it should be said that the larger vessels have better accommodations, I reply, that it can only be in the height of the room, the slaves being stowed equally close. I assert farther, that in some of these they have not had so much room upon the floor by one square foot, as in those, which have been just specified; for I have known the number of slaves, which many of them have carried, and have had their apartments measured.

Being stowed then in the manner thus described, they soon begin to experience the effects, which might naturally be presumed to arise from their situation. In consequence of the pestilential breath of so many confined in so small a space, they become sickly, and from the vicissitude of heat and cold, of heat when confined below, and of cold when suddenly brought up for air, a flux<sup>3</sup> is generated. Whenever this disorder attacks them, no pen can be adequate to the task of describing their situation.

Imagine only for a moment the gratings to be opened, but particularly after a rain, which has occasioned them to be covered for some time.

The first scene that presents itself, is a cluster of unhappy people, who, overcome by excessive heat and stench, have fainted away.

The next that occurs, is that of one of them endeavouring to press forward to the light, to catch a mouthful of wholesome air, but hindered by the partner of his chains, who is lying dead at his feet, and whom he has not sufficient strength to drag after him.

The third is conspicuous in the instance of those, who are just on the point of fainting, and who are wallowing in the blood and mucus of the intestines, with which the floor is covered.

Such are the scenes, that universally present themselves in the case supposed; and how agonizing and insufferable their situation must have been during this period of their confinement, none, I believe, can possibly conceive, unless they had been the partners of their chains.

\* \* \*

With respect to the conduct of the *receivers*, I shall mention an instance, which happened in September of the year 1781.

The captain of a ship, then on the middle passage, had lost a considerable number of his slaves by death. The mortality was still spreading, and so rapidly, that it was impossible to say either where, or when it would end. Thus circumstanced, and uneasy at the thought of the loss which was likely to accrue to his owners, he began to rack his ingenuity to repair it. He came at length to the diabolical resolution of selecting those that were the most sickly, and of throwing them into the sea: conceiving, that if he could plead a necessity for the deed, the loss would devolve from the owners to the underwriters of the vessel.

The plea, which he proposed to set up, was a want of water, though neither the seamen nor the slaves had been put upon short allowance.

Thus armed, as he imagined, with an invincible excuse, he began to execute his design. He selected accordingly *one hundred* and

*thirty-two* of the most sickly of the slaves. *Fifty-four* of these were immediately thrown into the sea, and *forty-two* were made to be partakers of their fate on the succeeding day.

But here, as if Providence expressly disapproved of the design, and had determined to cut off his excuse for sacrificing the rest, and exhibit a proof against him, a shower of rain immediately succeeded the transaction, and lasted for three days.

Notwithstanding this, the *remaining twenty-six* were brought upon deck to complete the number of victims, which avarice had at first determined to sacrifice to her shrine. The first sixteen submitted to be thrown into the sea; but the rest, with a noble resolution, would not suffer the contaminated *receivers* to touch them, but leapt after their companions, and shared their fate.

Thus was perpetrated a deed, unparalleled in the memory of man, or in the history of former times, and of so black and complicated a nature, that were it to be perpetuated to future generations, and to rest on the testimony of an individual, it could not possibly be believed.

I have now afforded a specimen, though in a manner inadequate to convey a just idea, of the different tragical scenes, that happen during the middle passage, and before the arrival of the vessels at their destined ports. To mention others, would be only to increase a painful, and to perform an unnecessary task. I shall therefore close my description here, sorry that, though I have studied to be concise, I should have felt myself obliged to lay open to the feelings of the reader, such a source of uneasiness and pain.

1788

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Small supply boats.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: River that flows into the Bristol Channel in the west of England.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Diarrhea or dysentery.[Return to reference 3](#)

## WILLIAM COWPER

The life of William Cowper (1731–1800) was darkened by struggles with mental illness and, in later years, by his conviction of his certain damnation: his attempt at suicide in 1763 was, he believed, a sin for which no divine forgiveness could be obtained. Cowper sought relief from this knowledge of his outcast condition in country seclusion. Fleeing London, where he had studied law, in 1768 he settled with his friends the Unwins in rural Olney. There Cowper became a neighbor of John Newton, with whom he co-authored the *Olney Hymns* (1779). The poetry he published afterward, especially his long poem in meditative blank verse, *The Task* (1785), made him the most widely read poet of his generation, an inspiration for Charlotte Smith, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Also contributing to Cowper's fame were the handful of short poems supporting abolition that he published in the late 1780s. "The Negro's Complaint"—one of the most powerful of these poems thanks to its unsettling use of ballad form and its self-asserting speaker prophesying divine retribution—was commissioned by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves. They added the subtitle "A subject for conversation at the tea table" and arranged for thousands of copies to be printed and mailed across England.

# The Negro's Complaint

*To the tune of "Hosier's Ghost" or As near Porto Bello lying.*<sup>1</sup>

Forced from Home and all its pleasures  
Afric's coast I left forlorn,  
To encrease a stranger's treasures  
O'er the raging billows borne;  
5 Men from England bought and sold me,  
Pay'd my price in paltry gold,  
But though slave they have enroll'd me  
Minds are never to be sold.

Still in thought as free as ever  
What are England's rights, I ask,  
10 Me from my delights to sever,  
Me to torture, me to task?  
Fleecy locks and black complexion  
Cannot forfeit Nature's claim;  
Skins may differ, but Affection  
15 Dwells in White and Black the same.

Why did all-creating Nature  
Make the plant for which we toil?  
Sighs must fan it, tears must water,  
Sweat of ours must dress<sup>2</sup> the soil.  
20 Think, ye Masters iron-hearted  
Lolling at your jovial boards,<sup>o</sup>  
Think how many backs have smarted  
For the sweets your Cane affords.

Is there, as ye sometimes tell us,  
25 Is there One who reigns on high?

Has he bid you buy and sell us  
Speaking from his throne the sky?  
Ask him if your knotted scourges,  
Matches, blood-extorting screws<sup>o</sup>  
30 Are the means that Duty urges  
Agents of his Will to use?

Hark—He answers. Wild tornadoes  
Strewing yonder flood with wrecks,  
Wasting Towns, Plantations, Meadows,  
35 Are the voice with which he speaks.  
He foreseeing what vexations  
Afric's sons should undergo,  
Fix'd their Tyrants' habitations  
Where his whirlwinds answer—No.  
40

By our blood in Afric wasted  
'Ere our necks received the chain,  
By the mis'ries that we tasted  
Crossing in your barks<sup>o</sup> the main,<sup>o</sup>  
45 By our suff'rings since ye brought us  
To the man-degrading mart,  
All sustain'd with patience taught us  
Only by a broken heart—

Deem our nation Brutes no longer  
'Till some reason ye shall find  
50 Worthier of regard and stronger  
Than the Colour of our Kind.  
Slaves of Gold! Whose sordid dealings  
Tarnish all your boasted pow'rs  
Prove that *You* have Human Feelings  
55 'Ere ye proudly question *Ours*.

- Note 1: The 18th-century ballad "Admiral Hosier's Ghost," by the poet Richard Glover, told the story of Francis Hosier's 1726 blockade of the Spanish-controlled Porto Bello in the Caribbean, during which Hosier, along with thousands of his sailors, died from disease; that ballad had itself been set to a popular tune known as "The Sailor's Complaint."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Fertilize. One thing that makes sugarcane production extraordinarily labor intensive is that sugarcane thrives only with heavy manuring.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *dining tables*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thumbscrews*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ships* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ocean*[Return to reference](#) °



## OLAUDAH EQUIANO

“Written by Himself”: the words concluding the title given to Equiano’s 1789 memoir themselves make a statement about this African’s literacy and membership in the community of rational argumentation. “The life of an African written by himself is certainly a curiosity,” wrote Mary Wollstonecraft in her review, “as it has been a favourite philosophic whim to degrade the numerous nations, on whom the sun-beams more directly dart, . . . and hastily to conclude that nature . . . designed to stamp them with a mark of slavery.”

“Written by Himself” also encapsulates the challenge that his *Interesting Narrative* posed not only to British racism but also to the iconography of African passivity elaborated in many abolitionist writings. These tended to picture the slave trade’s Black victims as recipients either of White people’s malice or of their mercy: in this iconography suicide was Blacks’ only self-assertive act.

Recent archival discoveries indicate that Equiano (ca. 1745–1797) must at some moments in his life have told people that he had been born in South Carolina. However, many scholars continue to accept the account of his upbringing he gives within his memoir. There he identifies himself as an African by birth and explains how his idyllic childhood in what is now modern Nigeria was brought to a traumatic end when he was kidnapped by slave traders. He was shipped first to Barbados and then to North America, ending up the property of a British naval officer. He remained six years in the service of Michael Pascal, obtaining some informal education and undergoing Christian baptism. In 1763 Pascal abruptly sold him, despite previously encouraging the young man in the belief that his service had already won him his liberty. Eventually, in 1766, the Quaker who was Equiano’s next purchaser permitted him to buy his freedom. The price was £40, money that Equiano earned through the skillful trading he did on the side while laboring on this master’s ships. As a freeman Equiano exercised many trades before turning author:

hairdresser, seaman aboard a polar expedition, even overseer on a Central American plantation founded on slave labor. After his return to London in 1779 he both became involved in the abolitionist campaign spearheaded by Clarkson and made allies among the working-class membership of the radical London Corresponding Society. He spent the final years of his life lecturing to promote abolition and his book, which went through multiple editions and brought Equiano the prosperity that enabled him to support in comfort his English wife and their two daughters.

Throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, which is simultaneously a travelogue, an intervention into the abolition debate, and a spiritual autobiography, Equiano construes the events of his life as a series of providential deliverances. It is part of the complex art of his narrative that, however extensive these debts to God, he comes across, as well, as one of the period's most resolute self-made men.

***From The Interesting Narrative of the Life  
of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa,  
the African, Written by Himself***

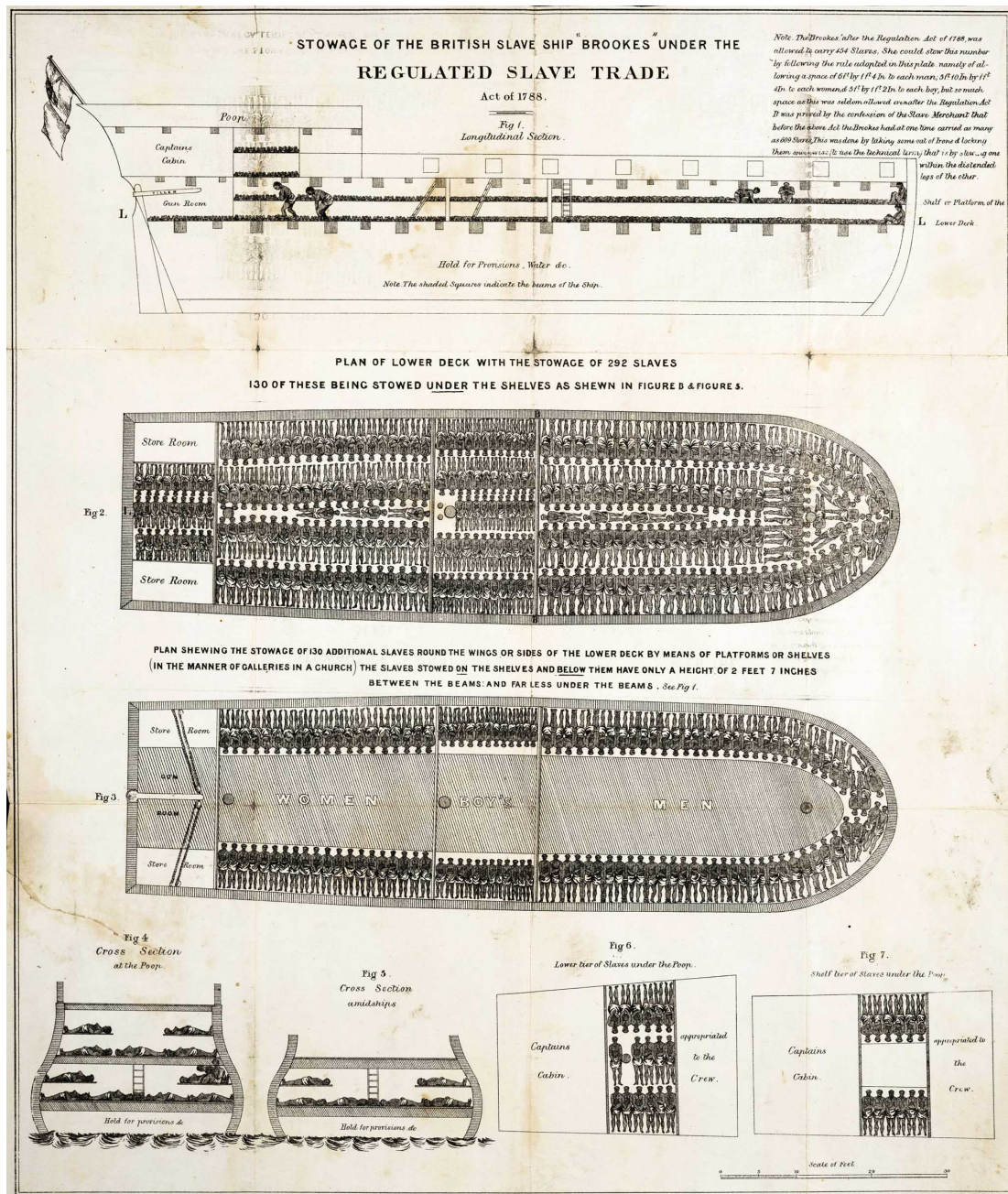
### **From *Chapter 3***

## **[FROM VIRGINIA TO ENGLAND]**

We were landed up a river a good way from the sea, about Virginia county, where we saw few or none of our native Africans, and not one soul who could talk to me.<sup>1</sup> I was a few weeks weeding grass, and gathering stones in a plantation; and at last all my companions were distributed different ways, and only myself was left. I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state I was constantly grieving and pining and wishing for death rather than any thing else. While I was in this plantation the gentleman, to whom I suppose the estate belonged, being unwell, I was one day sent for to his dwelling house to fan him; when I came into the room where he was I was very much affrighted at some things I saw, and the more so as I had seen a black woman slave as I came through the house, who was cooking the dinner, and the poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink. I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle. Soon after I had a fan put into my hand, to fan the gentleman while he slept; and so I did indeed with great fear. While he was fast asleep I indulged myself a great deal in looking about the room, which to me appeared very fine and curious. The first object that engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney and was going. I was quite surprised at the noise it made, and was afraid it would tell the gentleman any thing I might do amiss: and when I immediately after observed a picture hanging in the room, which appeared constantly to look at me, I was still more affrighted, having never seen such things as these before. At one time I thought it was something relative to magic; and not seeing it

move I thought it might be some way the whites had to keep their great men when they died, and offer them libation as we used to do to our friendly spirits. In this state of anxiety I remained till my master awoke, when I was dismissed out of the room, to my no small satisfaction and relief; for I thought that these people were all made up of wonders. In this place I was called Jacob; but on board the African snow<sup>2</sup> was called Michael. I had been some time in this miserable, forlorn, and much dejected state, without having any one to talk to, which made my life a burden, when the kind and unknown hand of the Creator (who in very deed leads the blind in a way they know not) now began to appear, to my comfort; for one day the captain of a merchant ship, called the Industrious Bee, came on some business to my master's house. This gentleman, whose name was Michael Henry Pascal, was a lieutenant in the royal navy, but now commanded this trading ship, which was somewhere in the confines of the county many miles off. While he was at my master's house it happened that he saw me, and liked me so well that he made a purchase of me. I think I have often heard him say he gave thirty or forty pounds sterling for me; but I do not now remember which. However, he meant me for a present to some of his friends in England: and I was sent accordingly from the house of my then master, one Mr. Campbell, to the place where the ship lay; I was conducted on horseback by an elderly black man (a mode of travelling which appeared very odd to me). When I arrived I was carried on board a fine large ship, loaded with tobacco, &c. and just ready to sail for England. I now thought my condition much mended; I had sails to lie on, and plenty of good victuals to eat; and every body on board used me very kindly, quite contrary to what I had seen of any white people before; I therefore began to think that they were not all of the same disposition. A few days after I was on board we sailed for England. I was still at a loss to conjecture my destiny. By this time, however, I could smatter a little imperfect English; and I wanted to know as well as I could where we were going. Some of the people of the ship used to tell me they were going to carry me back to my own country, and this made me very happy. I was quite rejoiced at the sound of going back; and thought if I should get

home what wonders I should have to tell. But I was reserved for another fate, and was soon undeceived when we came within sight of the English coast. While I was on board this ship, my captain and master named me *Gustavus Vasa*.<sup>3</sup> I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus; and when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and was obliged to bear the present name, by which I have been known ever since.



**The Slave Ship *Brookes*.** This engraving of the plan of a Liverpool-based slave ship, stowed with its human cargo, was published in 1789 by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves and made, Thomas Clarkson recalled, "an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it."

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It was about the beginning of the spring 1757 when I arrived in England; and I was near twelve years of age at that time. I was very much struck with the buildings and the pavement of the streets in Falmouth:<sup>4</sup> and, indeed, any object I saw filled me with new surprise. One morning, when I got upon deck, I saw it covered all over with the snow that fell over-night: as I had never seen any thing of the kind before, I thought it was salt; so I immediately ran down to the mate and desired him, as well as I could, to come and see how somebody in the night had thrown salt all over the deck. He, knowing what it was, desired me to bring some of it down to him: accordingly I took up a handful of it, which I found very cold indeed; and when I brought it to him he desired me to taste it. I did so, and I was surprised beyond measure. I then asked him what it was; he told me it was snow: but I could not in anywise understand him. He asked me if we had no such thing in my country; and I told him, No. I then asked him the use of it, and who made it; he told me a great man in the heavens, called God: but here again I was to all intents and purposes at a loss to understand him; and the more so, when a little after I saw the air filled with it, in a heavy shower, which fell down on the same day. After this I went to church; and having never been at such a place before, I was again amazed at seeing and hearing the service. I asked all I could about it; and they gave me to understand it was worshipping God, who made us and all things. I was still at a great loss, and soon got into an endless field of inquiries, as well as I was able to speak and ask about things. However, my little friend Dick<sup>5</sup> used to be my best interpreter; for I could make free with him, and he always instructed me with pleasure: and from what I could understand by him of this God, and in seeing these white people did not sell one another, as we did, I was much pleased; and in this I thought they were much happier than we Africans. I was astonished at the wisdom of the white people in all things I saw; but was amazed at their not sacrificing, or making any offerings, and eating with unwashed hands, and touching the dead. I likewise could not help remarking the particular slenderness of their women, which I did not at first like; and I



thought they were not so modest and shamefaced as the African women.

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.

My master lodged at the house of a gentleman in Falmouth, who had a fine little daughter about six or seven years of age, and she grew prodigiously fond of me; insomuch that we used to eat together, and had servants to wait on us. I was so much caressed by this family that it often reminded me of the treatment I had received from my little noble African master.<sup>6</sup> After I had been here a few days, I was sent on board of the ship; but the child cried so much after me that nothing could pacify her till I was sent for again. It is ludicrous enough, that I began to fear I should be betrothed to this young lady; and when my master asked me if I would stay there with her behind him, as he was going away with the ship, which had taken in the tobacco again, I cried immediately, and said I would not leave her. At last, by stealth, one night I was sent on board the ship again; and in a little time we sailed for Guernsey, where she was in part owned by a merchant, one Nicholas Doberry. As I was now amongst a people who had not their faces scarred, like some of the African nations where I had been, I was very glad I did not let them ornament me in that manner when I was with them. When we arrived at Guernsey, my master placed me to board and lodge with one of his mates, who had a wife and family there; and some months afterwards he went to England, and left me in care of this mate, together with my friend Dick: This mate had a little daughter, aged about five or six years, with whom I used to be much delighted. I had often observed that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy; but when she washed mine it did not look so: I therefore tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little play-mate (Mary), but it

was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: We pick up Equiano's story when, a young boy, having survived the voyage from Africa, he commences his life as an enslaved person on a Virginia plantation.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A two-masted vessel equipped with an additional half-mast.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: After the Swedish nobleman (1496–1560) who led a successful revolt against Danish rule of his country and became Sweden's king.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Harbor town on England's southwest coast.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Richard Baker, the White American boy who befriended Equiano during the voyage from Virginia.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Before being traded to the Englishmen who would convey him across the Atlantic, Equiano had been enslaved in an African household, where he became the playmate of the son.[Return to reference 6](#)

## From *Chapter 4*

### [SOLD AGAIN]

I thought now of nothing but being freed, and working for myself, and thereby getting money to enable me to get a good education; for I always had a great desire to be able at least to read and write; and while I was on ship-board I had endeavoured to improve myself in both. While I was in the *Ætna*<sup>7</sup> particularly, the captain's clerk taught me to write, and gave me a smattering of arithmetic as far as the rule of three. There was also one Daniel Queen, about forty years of age, a man very well educated, who messed with me<sup>8</sup> on board this ship, and he likewise dressed and attended the captain. Fortunately this man soon became very much attached to me, and took very great pains to instruct me in many things. He taught me to shave and dress hair a little, and also to read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me, which I did not comprehend. I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my country written almost exactly here; a circumstance which I believe tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory. I used to tell him of this resemblance; and many a time we have sat up the whole night together at this employment. In short, he was like a father to me; and some even used to call me after his name; they also styled me the black Christian. Indeed I almost loved him with the affection of a son. Many things I have denied myself that he might have them; and when I used to play at marbles or any other game, and won a few halfpence, or got any little money, which I sometimes did, for shaving any one, I used to buy him a little sugar or tobacco, as far as my stock of money would go. He used to say, that he and I never should part; and that, when our ship was paid off, as I was as free as himself or any other man on board, he would instruct me in his business, by which I might gain a good livelihood. This gave me new life and spirits; and my heart burned within me, while I thought the time long till I obtained my freedom. For though

my master had not promised it to me, yet, besides the assurances I had received that he had no right to detain me, he always treated me with the greatest kindness, and reposed in me an unbounded confidence; he even paid attention to my morals; and would never suffer me to deceive him, or tell lies, of which he used to tell me the consequences; and that if I did so God would not love me; so that, from all this tenderness, I had never once supposed, in all my dreams of freedom, that he would think of detaining me any longer than I wished.

In pursuance of our orders we sailed from Portsmouth for the Thames, and arrived at Deptford<sup>9</sup> the 10th of December, where we cast anchor just as it was high water. The ship was up about half an hour, when my master ordered the barge to be manned; and all in an instant, without having before given me the least reason to suspect any thing of the matter, he forced me into the barge; saying, I was going to leave him, but he would take care I should not. I was so struck with the unexpectedness of this proceeding, that for some time I did not make a reply, only I made an offer to go for my books and chest of clothes, but he swore I should not move out of his sight; and if I did he would cut my throat, at the same time taking his hanger.<sup>1</sup> I began, however, to collect myself; and, plucking up courage, I told him I was free, and he could not by law serve me so. But this only enraged him the more; and he continued to swear, and said he would soon let me know whether he would or not, and at that instant sprung himself into the barge from the ship, to the astonishment and sorrow of all on board. The tide, rather unluckily for me, had just turned downward, so that we quickly fell down the river along with it, till we came among some outward-bound West Indiamen; for he was resolved to put me on board the first vessel he could get to receive me. The boat's crew, who pulled against their will, became quite faint different times, and would have gone ashore; but he would not let them. Some of them strove then to cheer me, and told me he could not sell me, and that they would stand by me, which revived me a little; and I still entertained hopes; for as they pulled along he asked some vessels to receive me, but

they could not. But, just as we had got a little below Gravesend, we came alongside of a ship which was going away the next tide for the West Indies; her name was the Charming Sally, Captain James Doran; and my master went on board and agreed with him for me; and in a little time I was sent for into the cabin. When I came there Captain Doran asked me if I knew him; I answered that I did not; "Then," said he "you are now my slave." I told him my master could not sell me to him, nor to any one else. "Why," said he, "did not your master buy you?" I confessed he did. "But I have served him," said I, "many years, and he has taken all my wages and prize-money,<sup>2</sup> for I only got one sixpence during the war; besides this I have been baptized;<sup>3</sup> and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me:" And I added, that I had heard a lawyer and others at different times tell my master so. They both then said that those people who told me so were not my friends; but I replied—it was very extraordinary that other people did not know the law as well as they. Upon this Captain Doran said I talked too much English; and if I did not behave myself well, and be quiet, he had a method on board to make me. I was too well convinced of his power over me to doubt what he said; and my former sufferings in the slaveship presenting themselves to my mind, the recollection of them made me shudder.

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 7: Pascal was given command of this Royal Navy ship in 1759, at the height of the Seven Years' War with France.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Dined together, as a fellow member of the crew.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Site of the Royal Dockyards on the Thames River, east of London. Portsmouth is a port on England's south coast.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Short sword.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Ships captured in naval battles were sold, along with their cargoes, and the money was distributed among the victorious crew as prizes.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Though it had been formally repudiated in 1729 in a legal opinion issued by England's attorney general and solicitor general, the belief that their baptism as Christians should automatically release individuals from slavery persisted.[Return to reference 3](#)

## From *Chapter 5*

### [CRUELTY OF THE WEST INDIAN PLANTERS]

On the 13th of February 1763, from the mast-head, we descried our destined island Montserrat; and soon after I beheld those

“Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can rarely dwell. Hope never comes  
That comes to all, but torture without end  
Still urges.”<sup>4</sup>

At the sight of this land of bondage, a fresh horror ran through all my frame, and chilled me to the heart. My former slavery now rose in dreadful review to my mind, and displayed nothing but misery, stripes, and chains; and, in the first paroxysm of my grief, I called upon God’s thunder, and his avenging power, to direct the stroke of death to me, rather than permit me to become a slave, and be sold from lord to lord.

\* \* \*

While I was in Montserrat I knew a negro man, named Emanuel Sankey, who endeavoured to escape from his miserable bondage, by concealing himself on board of a London ship: but fate did not favour the poor oppressed man; for, being discovered when the vessel was under sail, he was delivered up again to his master. This *Christian master* immediately pinned the wretch down to the ground at each wrist and ankle, and then took some sticks of sealing wax, and lighted them, and dropped it all over his back. There was another master who was noted for cruelty; and I believe he had not a slave but what had been cut, and had pieces fairly taken out of the flesh: and, after they had been punished thus, he used to make them get into a long wooden box or case he had for that purpose, in

which he shut them up during pleasure. It was just about the height and breadth of a man; and the poor wretches had no room, when in the case, to move.

It was very common in several of the islands, particularly in St. Kitt's, for the slaves to be branded with the initial letters of their master's name; and a load of heavy iron hooks hung about their necks. Indeed on the most trifling occasions they were loaded with chains; and often instruments of torture were added. The iron muzzle, thumb screws, &c. are so well known, as not to need a description, and were sometimes applied for the slightest faults. I have seen a negro beaten till some of his bones were broken, for even letting a pot boil over. Is it surprising that usage like this should drive the poor creatures to despair, and make them seek a refuge in death from those evils which render their lives intolerable—while,

“With shuddering horror pale, and eyes aghast,  
They view their lamentable lot, and find  
No rest!”<sup>5</sup>

1789

## Endnotes

- Note 4: From Milton's description of Hell: *Paradise Lost* 1.65–68, slightly misquoted (where Milton wrote “never,” Equiano writes “rarely”).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Again citing Milton's description of Hell: *Paradise Lost* 2.616–18. The merchant to whom, after their arrival in Montserrat, Captain Doran sells Equiano eventually permits him to purchase his freedom.[Return to reference 5](#)



## HANNAH MORE AND EAGLESFIELD SMITH

The complicated publication history of “The Sorrows of Yamba” hints at how the abolitionist cause could yoke together people from divergent backgrounds and with conflicting political views. The poem was long identified as a work by Hannah More (1745–1833), an author who began her career as a playwright, but who in the 1780s, prompted by her growing Evangelicalism and the spiritual counsel of John Newton, turned her formidable energies instead to charity work and didactic and polemical writings. Some of these writings urged moral reformation on fashionable ladies. Others aimed to inculcate habits of piety, industry, and submissiveness in the newly literate poor and to steer them away from the ideas of equality filling books such as Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. “The Sorrows of Yamba” debuted in print as part of the “Cheap Repository,” a series of tracts targeting this sector of the reading public that More and her sisters began publishing anonymously in 1795. Philanthropists bought up millions of these tracts, priced at a halfpence or penny each, so as to distribute their “entertaining” yet “useful” stories and ballads in Sunday schools, workhouses, and prisons; an Anglican bishop sent trunkfuls to the West Indies. Romanticist scholar Alan Richardson has discovered, however, that the Cheap Repository version of “The Sorrows” reworks a poem that Scottish author Eaglesfield Smith (ca. 1770–1838) appears to have sent to More in manuscript form and which he subsequently republished in the *Universal Magazine* in 1797, perhaps to reassert his authorship. Little is known about Smith, but another of his poems suggests a sympathy for the French Revolution that More would have deplored. More’s far-reaching alterations of Smith’s original poem converted a tragedy to a conversion narrative. The missionary who appears at line 81 in time to rescue Yamba from suicide and to redeem the reputation of White Englishmen is her invention.

# ***From The Sorrows of Yamba; or, The Negro Woman's Lamentation***

## **To the Tune of *Hosier's Ghost***

In St. Lucie's distant isle,<sup>1</sup>  
Still with Afric's love I burn;  
Parted many a thousand mile,  
Never, never to return.

5 Come, kind death! and give me rest;  
Yamba has no friend but thee;  
Thou canst ease my throbbing breast;  
Thou canst set the Prisoner free.

10 Down my cheeks the tears are dripping,  
Broken is my heart with grief;  
Mangled my poor flesh with whipping,  
Come, kind Death! and bring relief.

Born on Afric's golden coast,  
Once I was as blest as you;  
Parents tender I could boast,  
15 Husband dear, and children too.

Whity man he came from far,  
Sailing o'er the briny flood;  
Who, with help of British Tar,<sup>o</sup>  
20 Buys up human flesh and blood.

With the baby, at my breast  
(Other two were sleeping by)  
In my hut I sat at rest,

With no thought of danger nigh.

25 From the bush at even-tide,  
Rush'd the fierce man-stealing crew;  
Seiz'd the children by my side,  
Seiz'd the wretched Yamba too.

Then for love of filthy gold,  
30 Strait they bore me to the sea,  
Cramm'd me down a Slave-ship's hold,  
Where were hundreds stow'd like me.

Naked on the platform lying,  
Now we cross the tumbling wave;  
35 Shrieking, sickening, fainting, dying;  
Deed of shame for Britons brave!

At the savage Captain's beck,  
Now, like brutes, they make us prance;  
Smack the cat<sup>2</sup> about the deck,  
40 And in scorn they bid us dance.

Nauseous horse-beans they bring nigh,  
Sick and sad we cannot eat;  
Cat must cure the sulks, they cry,  
Down their throats we'll force the meat.

45 I, in groaning pass'd the night,  
And did roll my aching head;  
At the break of morning light,  
My poor child was cold and dead.

Happy, happy, there she lies;  
50 Thou shalt feel the lash no more;  
Thus full many a Negro dies,  
Ere we reach the destin'd shore.

55       Thee, sweet infant, none shall sell;  
          Thou hast gain'd a wat'ry grave;  
Clean escap'd the tyrants fell,  
          While thy mother lives a slave.

\* \* \*

75       Mourning thus my wretched state  
          (Ne'er may I forget the day)  
Once in dusk of evening late,  
          Far from home I dar'd to stray.

80       Dar'd, alas! with impious haste,  
          Tow'rds the roaring sea to fly;  
Death itself I long'd to taste,  
          Long'd to cast me in and die.

          There I met upon the Strand,<sup>o</sup>  
          English Missionary good;  
He had Bible book in hand,  
          Which poor me no understood.

85       Led by pity from afar,  
          He had left his native ground;  
Thus, if some inflict a scar,  
          Others fly to cure the wound.

90       Strait he pull'd me from the shore,  
          Bid me no self-murder do;  
Talk'd of state when life is o'er,  
          All from Bible good and true.

95       Then he led me to his cot,<sup>o</sup>  
          Sooth'd and pitied all my woe;  
Told me 'twas the Christian's lot,  
          Much to suffer here below.

Told me then of God's dear Son,  
(Strange and wond'rous is the story)  
What sad wrong to him was done,  
100 Tho' he was the Lord of Glory

Told me, too, like one who knew him,  
(Can such love as this be true?)  
How he died for them that slew him,  
Died for wretched Yamba too.

\* \* \*

125 Now I'll bless my cruel capture,  
(Hence I've known a Saviour's name)  
Till my grief is turn'd to rapture,  
And I half forget the blame.

130 But tho' here a Convert rare,  
Thanks her God for Grace divine;  
Let not man the glory share;  
Sinner, still the guilt is thine.

135 Here an injured Slave forgives,  
There a host for vengeance cry;  
Here a single Yamba lives,  
There a thousand droop and die.

\* \* \*

1795, 1797

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Saint Lucia, island in the eastern Caribbean Sea, claimed through the 18th century by both Britain and France. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Whip called the “cat o’ nine tails.”[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *sailor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *beach*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cottage*[Return to reference °](#)

## WILLIAM COBBETT

The *Political Register*, a digest of news combined with commentary that appeared weekly from 1802 until 1835, made William Cobbett (1763–1835) the most influential British journalist of the nineteenth century. The paper began as a loyalist organ, but, over time, as Cobbett came to support parliamentary reform, it morphed into the vehicle for an increasingly heated criticism of the government. When Cobbett launched a broadside version of the *Political Register* in 1816, priced at two pence to target working-class readers, his former allies condemned him for “poisoning the minds of the people.” In this long, varied career, Cobbett’s loathing for William Wilberforce was one of the few constants, with another being Cobbett’s suspicion of the abolitionist cause embraced by Wilberforce and his fellow Evangelical do-gooders: mere sentimentalism, or even a plot, Cobbett sometimes implied, to direct attention away from the plight of English workers—“poor white slaves in this kingdom.” A *Political Register* essay from 1823 called on Wilberforce to ponder the lives of factory workers paid starvation wages, “and then believe, if you can, . . . that we shall think you a man of humanity, making as you do such a bawling about [the Blacks’] imaginary sufferings, and saying not a word about the sufferings of . . . your own country people.” Olaudah Equiano’s career illustrated how working-class radicalism and abolition could be fused (see [p. 542](#), above), but Cobbett, convinced of Africans’ racial inferiority, would not contemplate such solidarity. The editorial excerpted here appeared in the *Political Register* in the first year of its run, just as the parliamentary campaign for abolition was reviving. It takes the form of a letter that Cobbett claims to have sent six years earlier to the bishop of Rochester, warning this member of the House of Lords of dire consequences should the Abolition Bill pass.

## ***From Slave Trade***

\* \* \*

That the sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testament authorize a slave trade, your lordship dares not deny; nay, my lord, you must allow they do more. Under the law, the slave trade is in a manner commanded by God Almighty, and under the Gospel dispensation, the holding in slavery persons purchased as slaves, is not only mentioned by our blessed Saviour and his apostles, without censure or disapprobation, but rules are given by St. Paul and 1st Peter, how slaves ought to demean themselves to their masters.

\* \* \*

If the purchasing slaves be now inhuman and unjust, it must always have been so; and the keeping persons in slavery, so unjustly acquired, must have been equally so: and your lordship must either allow the purchase and possession of slaves to be consistent with the law of God (unless you can shew when that law was abrogated) or acknowledge that the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, saints, confessors, fathers, and bishops of the church of God, both under the law and the Gospel, who have purchased, sold, or possessed slaves (bond men and bond maids), have acted with cruelty, oppression, inhumanity, and injustice. Such an opinion would be directly contrary to those doctrines which your lordship teaches, and which you and Mr. Wilberforce profess to believe.

This notable discovery, of the inhumanity and injustice of the slave trade, has never been made until the present aera of anarchy and confusion, wherein impious men have presumed to set up their own ideas of humanity and justice (in contradiction to the laws of God) as the standard of perfection.



\* \* \*

It may have hitherto escaped your lordship's attention, that the present attack on the property and reputation of the West-India planters, and the African merchants, originates from the same set of people who, one hundred and fifty years ago, voted peers and bishops to be useless. Do you think, my lord, these people to have so far changed their principles, as not to have as strong an inclination as formerly, "to bind kings in chains, and nobles in links of iron?"<sup>1</sup> Can you, my Lord, suppose these people less capable of injuring your lordships than they were, in the middle of the last century, because they have for their allies the philosophers, the illuminers, the atheists, and the jacobins of France? What these people have been capable of, they have already shewn you; they have availed themselves of the mistaken zeal of Mr. Wilberforce, the humane society in the Old Jewry,<sup>2</sup> and their missionary, the Rev. Mr. Clarkson, in preaching the doctrines of liberty and equality to the negroes.

Under pretence of abolishing slavery, and the slave trade, they have not only been the means of spreading ruin and desolation throughout the French West-India colonies, and in some of those belonging to Great-Britain (*St. Vincent's* and *Grenada*), inhabited by Frenchmen; but also of abolishing the Christian religion; imprisoning, banishing, or murdering nobles, bishops, and priests; and, as heretofore, of converting churches, and other buildings dedicated to religion, into arsenals, stables, and slaughter-houses; while the rents, revenues, and tythes of peers, bishops, and priests, have been the reward of the spoilers.

My Lord, the principal means whereby the anarchists of France have been enabled to effect their dreadful, rebellious, and anti-christian purposes, were by encouraging a disbelief of the sacred Scriptures, and revealed religion. Will the setting at naught and slighting the authority of the Scriptures (which are a strong support of our claim of right to buy slaves), strengthen that belief in them,

which is the best and surest foundation on which the title of your lordships to the respect of the laity is built?

\* \* \*

## 1796? **Endnotes**

1802

- Note 1: A reference to the dismantling of the Anglican Church that occurred during Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, at the height of Puritan power in England (1649–60). The quotation is from Psalms 149:8, often cited as a description of the Puritans' goals. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Name of the street in the City of London where the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves was headquartered. [Return to reference 2](#)

## ROBERT WEDDERBURN

From October to December 1817 Robert Wedderburn (1762?–1835?) published a weekly periodical, priced at three and half pence per issue, that he dedicated to the intertwined causes of antislavery and working-class resistance: *The Axe Laid to the Root, or a Fatal Blow to Oppressors, Being an Address to the Planters and Negroes of Jamaica*. His title alludes to a line in the Gospel of Luke (6:9) in which John the Baptist warns the people against the wrath to come. It also calls to mind Thomas Paine, who in works such as *Rights of Man* (see [p. 206](#), above) often resorted to this New Testament metaphor for the eradication of an old order. Historians of English radicalism often instance Wedderburn's life when they document how the revolutionary energies of the 1790s survived in Britain into the mid-nineteenth century despite a draconian government crackdown. Though nominally addressed to White and Black Jamaicans, Wedderburn's writings spoke powerfully to the impoverished Londoners among whom he lived for most of his adult life. He presented Afro-Carib people's battles for freedom as an inspiration the English poor might draw on when they turned against their oppressors.

Born in Jamaica, Wedderburn was the son of an African-born enslaved woman and the Scottish doctor and plantation owner who held her as property. Manumitted in early childhood by his father, though never acknowledged by him as his son, Wedderburn made his way to England by way of war service in the Royal Navy. Arriving in London around 1779 or 1780, he took up the trade of journeyman tailor, while also throwing himself (despite his lack of formal education) into the theological controversies of the day. Eventually he obtained a license to preach as a Unitarian minister. In that guise, he ran a chapel—located in a hayloft in a seedy London neighborhood—that also served as a debating club, where, after paying a small admission fee, people gathered to listen to

Wedderburn and others debate such questions as “Has a slave an Inherent right to slay his master who refuses him his liberty?” and “Which of the two parties are likely to be victorious, the Rich or the Poor, in the event of Universal War?” Readers today are positioned to appreciate Wedderburn’s oratorical gifts thanks—ironically enough—to the written transcripts made by the spies who infiltrated radical sites of sociability and then reported back to the government. The writings comprising *The Axe* retain something of the rough energy that magnetized Wedderburn’s listeners—and evidently were meant to be read aloud. We include two prose pieces from the periodical’s first number.

# ***From The Axe Laid to the Root***

## ***To the Editor.***<sup>[1](#)</sup>

Be it known to the world, that, I Robert Wedderburn, son of James Wedderburn, esq. of Inveresk, near Musselborough, by Rosannah his slave, whom he sold to James Charles Shalto Douglas, esq. in the parish of St. Mary, in the island of Jamaica, while pregnant with the said Wedderburn, who was not held as a slave, (a provision being made in the agreement, that the child when born should be free.) This Wedderburn, doth charge all potentates, governors, and governments of every description with felony, who does wickedly violate the sacred rights of man—by force of arms, or otherwise, seizing the persons of men and dragging them from their native country, and selling their stolen persons and generations—Wedderburn demands, in the name of God, in the name of natural justice, and in the name of humanity, that all slaves be set free; for innocent individuals are entitled to the protection of civil society; and that all stealers, receivers, and oppressors in this base practice be forgiven, as the crime commenced in the days of ignorance, and is now exposed in the enlightened age of reason.

Oh, ye oppressed, use no violence to your oppressors, convince the world you are rational beings, follow not the example of St. Domingo, let not your jubilee, which will take place, be stained with the blood of your oppressors, leave revengeful practices for European kings and ministers.<sup>[2](#)</sup>

My advice to you, is, to appoint a day wherein you will all pretend to sleep one hour beyond the appointed time of your rising to labour; let the appointed day be twelve months before it takes place; let it be talked of in your market place, and on the roads. The universality of your sleeping and non-resistance, will strike terror to your oppressors. Go to your labour peaceably after the hour is expired; and repeat it once a year, till you obtain your liberty. Union

among you, will strike tremendous terror to the receivers of stolen persons. But do not petition, for it is degrading to human nature to petition your oppressors. Above all, mind and keep possession of the land you now possess as slaves;<sup>3</sup> for without that, freedom is not worth possessing; for if you once give up the possession of your lands, your oppressors will have power to starve you to death, through making laws for their own accommodation; which will force you to commit crimes in order to obtain subsistence: as the landholders in Europe are serving those that are dispossessed of lands: for it is a fact, that thousands of families are now in a starving state; the prisons are full: humanity impells the executive power to withdraw the sentence of death on criminals, whilst the landholders, in fact, are surrounded with every necessary of life. Take warning by the sufferings of the European poor, and never give up your lands you now possess, for it is your right by God and nature, for the "earth was given to the children of men."<sup>4</sup>

Oh, ye christians, you are convinced of the crime of stealing human beings; and some have put a stop to it. By law, give up the stolen families in possession, and perfect your repentance. I call on a mighty people, and their sovereign, to burst the chains of oppression, and let the oppressed go free, says "the Lord;" and so says Wedderburn the deluded Spencean. Oh, ye Africans and relatives now in bondage to the Christians, because you are innocent and poor; receive this the only tribute the offspring of an African can give, for which, I may ere long be lodged in a prison, without even a trial; for it is a crime now in England to speak against oppression.

Dear countrymen and relatives, it is natural to expect you will enquire what is meant by a deluded Spencean; I must inform you it is a title given by ignorant or self-interested men, to the followers of one Thomas Spence,<sup>5</sup> who knew that the earth was given to the children of men, making no difference for colour or character, just or unjust; and that any person calling a piece of land his own private property, was a criminal; and though they may sell it, or will it to their children, it is only transferring of that which was first obtained by force or fraud, this old truth, newly discovered, has completely

terrified the landholders in England, and confounded the Attorney General and the Crown Lawyers; and what is more alarming, it is not in the power of the legislature, with all their objections to the doctrines to make a law to prevent the publishing of self evident truths, while a shadow of the British Constitution remains. The landholders, whose interest it is to oppose, is driven to the necessity of falsefying and misrepresenting the motives of the disciples of Spence; but truth once known, will dispel falsehood, as the rising sun excludes darkness.

Your humble servant being a Spencean Philanthropist, is proud to wear the name of a madman; if the landholders please, they may call me a traitor, or one who is possessed with the spirit of Beelzebub.<sup>6</sup> What can the landholders, priests or lawyers say, or do more than they did against Christ; yet, his doctrine is on record, which says "woe unto them that add house to house, or field to field."<sup>7</sup> When you are exorted to hold the land, and never give it up to your oppressors, you are not told to hold it as private property, but as tenants at will to the sovereignty of the people.

Beware of the clergy of every description, they are bound by law and interest, in all countries, to preach agreeable to the will of the governor under whom they live: as proof of which, they must have a licence, if not of the established church. Listen to them as far as your reason dictates of a future state, but never suffer them to interfere in your worldly affairs; for they are cunning, and therefore are more capable of vice than you are; for instance, one was hung at Kingston, for coining; one in London, for forgery; one for a rape; one for murder; one was detected throwing the sleeve of his surplice over the plate, while he robbed it, even at the time he was administering the Lord's supper, in the Borough; and Bishop Burn, of Kent, who had 800£. per annum, confessed on his death bed, he had practised the same offence for 40 years, and all these were college bred men, and of course gentlemen. You know also they buy and sell your persons as well as others, and thereby encouraging that base practice. This is not doing as they would be done by.

Adieu, for the present, my afflicted countrymen and relatives yet in bondage, though the prince, lords, and commons, are convinced it is a crime deserving of death, to steal and hold a man in bondage.

I am a West-Indian, a lover of liberty, and would dishonour human nature if I did not shew myself a friend to the liberty of others.

ROBERT WEDDERBURN.

\* \* \*

***To all who love to hear of the increase of liberty, are these few lines directed.***

The slaves of Jamaica, are ready now to demand a day of their masters, in addition to the day and a half that was allowed before, being taught by the methodists that it is a crime to labour on the sabbath day; and it is the opinion of many, that they will have it.

This information is by my brother's wife, who is held as a slave by a clergyman of the church of England; whether she obtained this information from the conversation which passed at her master's table, or whether it is her own observation, on what she had heard among her fellow slaves, I will not avow; but this information is confirmed by a letter from a book-keeper to his mother, who informed me, that it is the opinion of her son, that the island of Jamaica will be in the hands of the blacks within twenty years. Prepare for flight, ye planters, for the fate of St. Domingo awaits you. Get ready your blood hounds, the allies which you employed against the Maroons.<sup>8</sup> Recollect the fermentation will be universal. Their weapons are their bill-hooks;<sup>9</sup> their store of provision is every where in abundance; you know they can live upon sugar canes, and a vast variety of herbs and fruits,—yea, even upon the buds of trees. You cannot cut off their supplies. They will be victorious in their flight, slaying all before them; they want no turnpike roads: they will not stand to engage organized troops, like the silly Irish rebels. Their method of fighting is to be found in the scriptures, which they are



now learning to read. They will slay man, woman, and child, and not spare the virgin, whose interest is connected with slavery, whether black, white, or tawny. O ye planters, you know this has been done; the cause which produced former bloodshed still remains,—of necessity similar effects must take place. The holy alliance of Europe, cannot prevent it, they have enough to do at home, being compelled to keep a standing army in the time of peace, to enforce the civil law.

My heart glows with revenge, and cannot forgive. Repent ye christians, for flogging my aged grandmother before my face, when she was accused of witchcraft by a silly European.<sup>1</sup> O Boswell, ought not your colour and countrymen to be visited with wrath, for flogging my mother before my face, at the time when she was far advanced in pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> What was her crime? did not you give her leave to visit her aged mother; (she did not acquaint her mistress at her departure,) this was her fault. But it originates in your crime in holding her as a slave—could not you wait till she returned, but travel 15 miles to punish her on that visit. You set a pattern to your slaves to treat your wife with contempt, by taking your negro wenches to your adultrous bed, in preference to your wedded wife. It being a general practice in the island, is no excuse for you,—who was a scholar and professed to be a christian—how can I forgive you? Oh! my father, what do you deserve at my hands? Your crimes will be visited upon your legitimate offspring: for the sins of a wicked father will be visited upon his children, who continues in the practice of their father's crimes. Ought I not to encourage your slaves, O my brother, to demand their freedom even at the danger of your life, if it could not be obtained without.<sup>3</sup> Do not tell me you hold them by legal right. No law can be just which deprives another of his liberty, except for criminal offences: such law-makers according to the rules of equity, are felons of the deepest dye; for they attempt to justify wickedness. The time is fast approaching, when such rulers must act righteously, or be drawn from their seats; for truth and justice must prevail—combined armies cannot stop their progress—religious superstition, the support of tyrants, gives way.

The priesthood who took the lead, are compelled to sculk in the rear, and take shelter under Bell's system of education, to impress on the minds of youth their nonsensical creed; dreading the purity of the Lancasterian mode.<sup>4</sup> But you my countrymen, can act without education; the equality of your present station in slavery, is your strength. You all feel the injury—you are all capable of making resistance. Your oppressors know—they dread you—they can foresee their downfall when you determine to obtain your liberty, and possess your natural right—that is freedom. Beware, and offend not your God, like the jews of old, in choosing a king; agrandize no man by forms of law. He who preserves your liberty, will of necessity receive universal praise, like Washington, to endless generations, without the aid of hireling priests to celebrate his fame.

Check if possible by law and practice, that avarice in man, which is never satisfied. If you suffer any among you to become emensly rich, he will want homage, and a title; yea, he will dispose of your lives, liberty, and property; and to support his divine right, he will establish a priesthood—he will call in foreign usurpers to assist him to oppress you. Under the protection of foreign bayonets, he will threaten to erect a gallows at every door. France is reduced to this state of humiliation. A black king is capable of wickedness, as well as a white one. WEDDERBURN.

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The editor was Wedderburn himself, a ploy hiding the fact that his periodical was a one-man operation.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wedderburn draws on the Bible for the concept of jubilee: in Leviticus 25, the people are commanded every fifty years to mark a jubilee by canceling debt and freeing the enslaved. St. Domingo is Haiti, the Caribbean colony that, after an uprising by the enslaved people, declared its independence from France in 1804; long into the 19th century, it continued to

be linked in the British mind to violence and vengeance.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Referring to the provision grounds, plots of land conceded to enslaved people that enabled them to grow their own food. In the emancipation era, provision grounds would become a source of worry for British plantation owners: with access to those grounds, their labor force was more independent of their authority than they liked.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Quoting Psalms 115:16.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Thomas Spence (1750–1814), whom Wedderburn met in 1813, was a bookseller (who in the 1790s had been arrested repeatedly for selling seditious books and pamphlets) and political philosopher. His publications proposing that the institution of private property was inconsistent with justice and outlining plans for the nationalization of Britain’s agricultural land remained influential among the English poor for a generation.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The devil.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Quoting the prophet Isaiah (5:8).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In the warfare they waged in 1795–96 against the Maroon (free Black) communities of Jamaica, the British colonial authorities used bloodhounds that they imported from Cuba.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Machetes used in sugarcane cultivation.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: During his childhood in Kingston, Wedderburn lived with his grandmother, known as Talkee Amy. Around age eleven, as he recounts in greater detail in his *The Horrors of Slavery* (1824), he witnessed her flogging by a White man whom she had raised.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Boswell was the Scottish physician who purchased Wedderburn’s mother, Rosanna, after her sale by Wedderburn’s father.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Wedderburn’s half-brother Andrew Colville was a West Indian merchant.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Referring to the Bell-Lancaster controversy, a public dispute over the contrasting plans for literacy education for the poor that had been proffered by Joseph Lancaster (1778–1838) and Andrew Bell (1753–1832). The latter's scheme had Anglican religious education at its center and was therefore championed by figures such as Coleridge, who first plunged into the controversy in lectures he gave in 1808. Wedderburn, Nonconformist in religion, took the opposing side.[Return to reference 4](#)

## ELIZABETH HEYRICK

Elizabeth Heyrick (1769–1831), born in Leicester to a middle-class family with Unitarian, progressive views, converted to Quakerism following the death of her husband John in 1797. Around this time, she began a career of committed, outspoken activism on a number of fronts, joining campaigns for a minimum wage, workers' rights, and animal rights, and against slavery and capital punishment, all topics of her political writing. Her boldly argued pamphlet *Immediate, not Gradual Abolition* was issued in the aftermath of the 1823 slave uprising in Demerara (part of modern Guyana), then under British control. Mixing religious rhetoric with economic and political analysis, Heyrick takes aim not only at those defending slavery but also at the leading (male-dominated) abolitionist groups, who at the time mostly advocated a cautious approach to emancipation; Heyrick insists instead that there is no justification for delaying outlawing the institution of slavery once and for all. If in some respects Heyrick's call for abstinence from West Indian products looks back to the sugar and tea boycotts of the 1790s, her emphasis on the economic power of individual consumers to remedy unjust conditions—and her insistence on consumers' complicity in the harms effected by the systems that bring them the goods they buy—resonate strikingly with present-day debates about the ethics of consumption and the effectiveness of consumer action on issues such as labor practices and the environment. Widely reprinted in Evangelical newspapers and magazines, the pamphlet had an international influence that continued after passage of the Emancipation Act in 1833: the introduction to an 1836 American reprinting by the Philadelphia Ladies' Anti-slavery Society, one of several stateside editions to appear in the late 1830s, credited Heyrick with pushing abolitionist discourse on both sides of the Atlantic toward "immediatism," and stressed the applicability of her critique of slavery in the West Indies to the problem of slavery in the

United States, where emancipation was then still almost thirty years away.

## ***From Immediate, Not Gradual Abolition***

It is now seventeen years since the *Slave Trade* was abolished by the Government of this country, but *Slavery* is still perpetuated in our West India colonies, and the horrors of the Slave Trade are aggravated rather than mitigated.<sup>1</sup> By making it felony for British subjects to be concerned in that inhuman traffic, England has only transferred her share of it to other countries. She has, indeed, by negotiation and remonstrance, endeavoured to persuade them to follow her example. But has she succeeded? How should she, whilst there is so little consistency in her conduct? Who will listen to her pathetic declamations on the injustice and cruelty of the Slave Trade, whilst she rivets the chains upon her own slaves, and subjects them to all the injustice and cruelty which she so eloquently deplores when her own interest is no longer at stake? Before we can have any rational hope of prevailing on our guilty neighbours to abandon this atrocious commerce; to relinquish the gain of oppression; the wealth obtained by rapine and violence; by the deep groans, the bitter anguish of our unoffending fellow creatures; we must purge ourselves from these pollutions; we must break the iron yoke from off the neck of *our own slaves*, and let the wretched captives in our own islands go free. Then, and not till then, we shall speak to the surrounding nations with the *all-commanding eloquence of sincerity and truth*, and our persuasions will be backed by the *irresistible argument of consistent example*. But to invite others to be just and merciful whilst we grasp in our own hands the rod of oppression; to solicit others to relinquish the wages of iniquity whilst we are putting them into our own pockets—what is it but cant and hypocrisy? Do such preachers of justice and mercy ever make converts? On the contrary, do they not render themselves ridiculous and contemptible?

But let us, *individually*, bring this great question closely home to our own bosoms. We that hear, and read, and approve, and applaud

the powerful appeals, the irrefragable arguments against the Slave Trade, and against slavery, are we *ourselves* sincere, or hypocritical? Are *we* the true friends of justice, or do we only cant about it? To which party do *we* really belong? to the friends of emancipation, or of perpetual slavery? Every individual belongs to one party or the other; not speculatively, or professionally merely, but practically. The perpetuation of slavery in our West India colonies, is not an abstract question, to be settled between the Government and the Planters; it is a question in which we are *all* implicated; we are all guilty, (with shame and compunction let us admit the opprobrious truth) of supporting and perpetuating slavery. The West Indian planter and the people of this country, stand in the same moral relation to each other, as the thief and the receiver of stolen goods.<sup>2</sup> The planter refuses to set his wretched captive at liberty, treats him as a beast of burden, compels his reluctant unremunerated labourer under the lash of the cart whip, why? because WE furnish the stimulant to all this injustice, rapacity, and cruelty, by PURCHASING ITS PRODUCE. Heretofore, it may have been thoughtlessly and unconsciously, but now this palliative is removed;—the veil of ignorance is rent aside;—the whole nation must now divide itself into the *active supporters*, and the *active opposers* of slavery; there is no longer any ground for a neutral party to stand upon.

The state of slavery, in our West Indian islands, is now become notorious; *the secret is out*; the justice and humanity, the *veracity* also, of slave owners, is exactly ascertained; the credit due to their assertions, that their slaves are better fed, better clothed, are more comfortable, more *happy* than our English peasantry, is now universally understood.<sup>3</sup> The tricks and impostures practised by the colonial assemblies, to hoodwink the people, to humbug the Government, and to bamboozle the *saints* (as the friends of emancipation are scornfully termed) have all been detected; and the cry of the nation has been raised, from one end to the other, against this complicated system of knavery and imposture; of intolerable oppression, of relentless and savage barbarity.



But is all this knowledge to end in exclamations, in petitions, and remonstrances? Is there nothing to be *done*, as well as said? Are there no tests to prove our sincerity; no sacrifices to be offered in confirmation of our zeal? Yes, there is *one*, (but it is in itself so small and insignificant that it seems almost burlesque to dignify it with the name of sacrifice) it is ABSTINENCE FROM THE USE OF WEST INDIAN PRODUCTIONS, *sugar*, especially, in the cultivation of which slave labour is chiefly occupied. Small, however, and insignificant as the sacrifice may appear, it would, at once, give the death blow to West Indian slavery. When there was no longer a market for the productions of *slave labour*, then, and *not till then*, will the slaves be emancipated.<sup>4</sup>

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The enemies of slavery have hitherto ruined their cause by the senseless cry of *gradual* emancipation.<sup>5</sup> It is marvellous that the *wise* and the *good* should have suffered themselves to have been imposed upon by this wily artifice of the slave holder; for with him must the project of gradual emancipation have first originated. The share holder knew very well, that his prey would be secure, so long as the abolitionists could be cajoled into a demand for *gradual* instead of *immediate* abolition. He knew very well, that the contemplation of a *gradual* emancipation, would beget a *gradual indifference to emancipation itself*. He knew very well, that even the *wise* and the *good*, may, by habit and familiarity, be brought to endure and tolerate almost any thing. He had caught the poet's idea, that—

Vice is a monster of such frightful mein,  
As to be hated, need but to be seen;  
But, seen too oft, *familiar with her face*,  
*We first endure, then pity, then embrace.*<sup>6</sup>

He caught the idea, and knew how to turn it to advantage. He knew very well, that the faithful delineation of the horrors of West

Indian slavery would produce such a general insurrection of sympathetic and indignant feeling; such abhorrence of the oppressor, such compassion for the oppressed, as must soon have been fatal to the whole system. He knew very well, that a strong moral fermentation had begun, which, had it gone forward, must soon have purified the nation from this foulest of its corruptions; that the cries of the people for emancipation, would have been too unanimous, and too importunate for the Government to resist, and that slavery would, long ago, have been exterminated throughout the British dominions. Our example might have spread from kingdom to kingdom, from continent to continent, and the slave trade, and slavery, might, by this time, have been abolished all the world over: "A sacrifice of a sweet savour," might have ascended to the Great Parent of the Universe; "His kingdom might have come, and his will (thus far) have been done on earth, as it is in Heaven."<sup>7</sup>

But this GRADUAL ABOLITION, has been the grand marplot of human virtue and happiness; the very master-piece of satanic policy. By converting the cry for *immediate*, into *gradual* emancipation, the prince of slave holders, "transformed himself, with astonishing dexterity, into an angel of light," and, thereby, "deceived the very elect."<sup>8</sup> He saw very clearly, that if public justice and humanity, especially, if *Christian* justice and humanity, could be brought to demand only a *gradual* extermination of the enormities of the slave system; if they could be brought to *acquiesce*, but for one year, or for one month, in the slavery of our African brother, in robbing him of all the rights of humanity, and degrading him to a level with the brutes; that then, they could imperceptibly be brought to acquiesce in all this for an unlimited duration. He saw, very clearly, that the time for the extermination of slavery, was precisely that, when its horrid impiety and enormity were *first distinctly known and strongly felt*. He knew, that every moment's unnecessary delay, between the discovery of an imperious duty, and the setting earnestly about its accomplishment, was dangerous, if not fatal to success. He knew, that strong excitement, was necessary to strong effort; that intense feeling was necessary to stimulate intense exertion; that, as strong

excitement, and intense feeling are generally transient, in proportion to their strength and intensity, the most effectual way of crushing a great and virtuous enterprize, was to gain time; to defer it to "a more convenient season," when the zeal and ardour of the first convictions of duty had subsided; when our sympathies had become languid; when considerations of the difficulties and hazards of the enterprize, the solicitations of ease and indulgence should have chilled the warm glow of humanity; quenched the fervid heroism of virtue; when familiarity with relations of violence and outrage, crimes and miseries, should have abated the horror of their first impression, and at length induced indifference.

\* \* \*

It is utterly astonishing, with such an object as West Indian slavery before us, rendered palpable, in all its horrors, almost to our very senses, by a multitude of indubitable facts, collected from various sources of the highest authority, all uniting in the same appalling evidence; with the sight of our fellow-creatures in bondage so rigorous; in moral and physical degradation so abject; under a tyranny so arbitrary, wanton and barbarous; it is utterly astonishing, that our compassion and sympathy should be so timid and calculating, so slow and cautious.

Under the contemplation of *individual* suffering, comparatively trifling, both in nature and duration, our compassion is prompt and quick in its movements; our exertions, spontaneous and instinctive; we go the shortest way to work, in effecting the relief of the sufferer. But, in emancipating *eight hundred thousand* of our fellow creatures and fellow subjects from a worse than Egyptian bondage, we advance towards the object, by a route, the most indirect and circuitous; we petition Parliament, year after year, for *gradual* emancipation: to what purpose?

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Britain's 1807 abolition of the slave trade (though not slavery) was a point of national pride, as it preceded action by other European nations. An 1811 act made involvement in the slave trade punishable as a felony.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Beginning in the late 17th century, Quaker antislavery writers argued that slavery violated the biblical injunction against stealing, identifying slavery with the theft of bodies. Heyrick extends that logic to commodities produced through the slave system.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Proslavery writers including William Cobbett used the claim that West Indian slaves were better off than working-class people in England to portray abolition as a threat to English laborers. Heyrick elsewhere links the rights of enslaved persons in the colonies with English workers' rights.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: As some commentators at the time noted, avoiding the purchase of West Indian sugar often meant, in practice, buying sugar from East India, which was also produced under exploitative conditions, often through forms of compulsory labor.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Gradualism was a central tenet for many abolitionists, reflecting both their sense of what was politically practicable and a world view that equated sudden change with the potential for violence or economic disruption.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Heyrick slightly misquotes Pope's *Essay on Man*, Epistle 2, lines 217–20.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Invoking biblical authority, Heyrick quotes Ephesians 5:2 and emends the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6:10.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In Matthew 24:24, Christ warns against false prophets appearing in end times whose impostures might "deceive the very elect."[Return to reference 8](#)

# MARY PRINCE

In 1831 Mary Prince, born a slave in Bermuda sometime around 1788, then living as a freewoman in London, became the English tradition's first Black female autobiographer. As the journalist Thomas Pringle explains in the preface that vouches for this often devastating memoir's authenticity, the "idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself." "She wished it to be done, she said"—Pringle, secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, furthered her project by arranging for a White lady visitor to take down her words—so the "good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered."

Prince's motives for recalling past sufferings were personal as well. In England, where Prince's last owner, the merchant John Wood, had brought her in 1828 to labor as a washerwoman and nanny to his children, emancipation had been the law of the land since the legal decision in the 1772 Somerset case. Prince was therefore quick to recognize that Wood had inadvertently presented her with an opportunity: "I knew that I was free in England," she explains. If, however, Prince returned to the West Indies, so as to rejoin the husband her master had forced her to leave behind, she would forfeit that freedom and revert to her slave status. *The History of Mary Prince* protests this dilemma. It demonstrated to the reading public of 1831, who bought up three editions of the pamphlet, that their complacency about the morality of empire was premature and that the freedom Black subjects could claim under the empire's laws remained fatally qualified.

Soon after 1831 Prince disappears from the historical record. It is unknown whether publication of the *History* proved effective for Prince personally, but it doubtless helped speed passage of the Emancipation Bill in 1833.

## ***From The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself***

I was born at Brackish-Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm belonging to Mr. Charles Myners. My mother was a household slave; and my father, whose name was Prince, was a sawyer belonging to Mr. Trimmingham, a ship-builder at Crow-Lane. When I was an infant, old Mr. Myners died, and there was a division of the slaves and other property among the family. I was bought along with my mother by old Captain Darrel, and given to his grandchild, little Miss Betsey Williams. Captain Williams, Mr. Darrel's son-in-law, was master of a vessel which traded to several places in America and the West Indies, and he was seldom at home long together.

Mrs. Williams was a kind-hearted good woman, and she treated all her slaves well. She had only one daughter, Miss Betsey, for whom I was purchased, and who was about my own age. I was made quite a pet of by Miss Betsey, and loved her very much. She used to lead me about by the hand, and call me her little nigger. This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow.

My mother was a household slave in the same family. I was under her own care, and my little brothers and sisters were my play-fellows and companions. My mother had several fine children after she came to Mrs. Williams,—three girls and two boys. The tasks given out to us children were light, and we used to play together with Miss Betsey, with as much freedom almost as if she had been our sister.

My master, however, was a very harsh, selfish man; and we always dreaded his return from sea. His wife was herself much afraid of him; and, during his stay at home, seldom dared to shew her usual kindness to the slaves. He often left her, in the most distressed

circumstances, to reside in other female society, at some place in the West Indies of which I have forgot the name. My poor mistress bore his ill-treatment with great patience, and all her slaves loved and pitied her. I was truly attached to her, and, next to my own mother, loved her better than any creature in the world. My obedience to her commands was cheerfully given: it sprung solely from the affection I felt for her, and not from fear of the power which the white people's law had given her over me.

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At this time Mrs. Williams died. I was told suddenly of her death, and my grief was so great that, forgetting I had the baby in my arms,<sup>1</sup> I ran away directly to my poor mistress's house; but reached it only in time to see the corpse carried out. Oh, that was a day of sorrow,—a heavy day! All the slaves cried. My mother cried and lamented her sore; and I (foolish creature!) vainly entreated them to bring my dear mistress back to life: I knew nothing rightly about death then, and it seemed a hard thing to bear. When I thought about my mistress I felt as if the world was all gone wrong; and for many days and weeks I could think of nothing else. I returned to Mrs. Pruden's; but my sorrow was too great to be comforted, for my own dear mistress was always in my mind. Whether in the house or abroad, my thoughts were always talking to me about her.

I staid at Mrs. Pruden's about three months after this; I was then sent back to Mr. Williams to be sold. Oh, that was a sad sad time! I recollect the day well. Mrs. Pruden came to me and said, "Mary, you will have to go home directly; your master is going to be married, and he means to sell you and two of your sisters to raise money for the wedding." Hearing this I burst out a crying,—though I was then far from being sensible of the full weight of my misfortune, or of the misery that waited for me. Besides, I did not like to leave Mrs. Pruden, and the dear baby, who had grown very fond of me. For some time I could scarcely believe that Mrs. Pruden was in earnest, till I received orders for my immediate return.—Dear Miss Fanny!

how she cried at parting with me, whilst I kissed and hugged the baby, thinking I should never see him again. I left Mrs. Pruden's, and walked home with a heart full of sorrow. The idea of being sold away from my mother and Miss Betsey was so frightful, that I dared not trust myself to think about it. We had been bought of Mr. Myners, as I have mentioned, by Miss Betsey's grandfather, and given to her, so that we were by right *her* property, and I never thought we should be separated or sold away from her.

When I reached the house, I went in directly to Miss Betsey. I found her in great distress; and she cried out as soon as she saw me, "Oh, Mary! my father is going to sell you all to raise money to marry that wicked woman. You are *my* slaves, and he has no right to sell you; but it is all to please her." She then told me that my mother was living with her father's sister at a house close by, and I went there to see her. It was a sorrowful meeting; and we lamented with a great and sore crying our unfortunate situation. "Here comes one of my poor picaninnies!" she said, the moment I came in, "one of the poor slave-brood who are to be sold to-morrow."

Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day,—it is too much.—It recalls the great grief that filled my heart, and the woeful thoughts that passed to and fro through my mind, whilst listening to the pitiful words of my poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children. I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered. The great God above alone knows the thoughts of the poor slave's heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these. All that we love taken away from us—Oh, it is sad, sad! and sore to be borne!—I got no sleep that night for thinking of the morrow; and dear Miss Betsey was scarcely less distressed. She could not bear to part with her old playmates, and she cried sore and would not be pacified.

The black morning at length came; it came too soon for my poor mother and us. Whilst she was putting on us the new osnaburghs<sup>2</sup> in which we were to be sold, she said, in a sorrowful voice, (I shall never forget it!) "See, I am *shrouding* my poor children; what a task for a mother!"—She then called Miss Betsey to take leave of us. "I



am going to carry my little chickens to market," (these were her very words.) "take your last look of them; may be you will see them no more." "Oh, my poor slaves! my own slaves!" said dear Miss Betsey, "you belong to me; and it grieves my heart to part with you."—Miss Betsey kissed us all, and, when she left us, my mother called the rest of the slaves to bid us good bye. One of them, a woman named Moll, came with her infant in her arms. "Ay!" said my mother, seeing her turn away and look at her child with the tears in her eyes, "your turn will come next." The slaves could say nothing to comfort us; they could only weep and lament with us. When I left my dear little brothers and the house in which I had been brought up, I thought my heart would burst.

Our mother, weeping as she went, called me away with the children Hannah and Dinah, and we took the road that led to Hamble Town,<sup>3</sup> which we reached about four o'clock in the afternoon. We followed my mother to the market-place, where she placed us in a row against a large house, with our backs to the wall and our arms folded across our breasts. I, as the eldest, stood first, Hannah next to me, then Dinah; and our mother stood beside, crying over us. My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body. But who cared for that? Did one of the many bystanders, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! They were not all bad, I dare say, but slavery hardens white people's hearts towards the blacks; and many of them were not slow to make their remarks upon us aloud, without regard to our grief—though their light words fell like cayenne on the fresh wounds of our hearts. Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves.

At length the vendue master,<sup>4</sup> who was to offer us for sale like sheep or cattle, arrived, and asked my mother which was the eldest. She said nothing, but pointed to me. He took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and, turning me slowly

round, exposed me to the view of those who attended the vendue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. I was then put up to sale. The bidding commenced at a few pounds, and gradually rose to fifty-seven,<sup>5</sup> when I was knocked down to the highest bidder; and the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for so young a slave.

I then saw my sisters led forth, and sold to different owners; so that we had not the sad satisfaction of being partners in bondage. When the sale was over, my mother hugged and kissed us, and mourned over us, begging of us to keep up a good heart, and do our duty to our new masters. It was a sad parting; one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing.

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My new master was one of the owners or holders of the salt ponds,<sup>6</sup> and he received a certain sum for every slave that worked upon his premises, whether they were young or old. This sum was allowed him out of the profits arising from the salt works. I was immediately sent to work in the salt water with the rest of the slaves. This work was perfectly new to me. I was given a half barrel and a shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water, from four o'clock in the morning till nine, when we were given some Indian corn boiled in water, which we were obliged to swallow as fast as we could for fear the rain should come on and melt the salt. We were then called again to our tasks, and worked through the heat of the day; the sun flaming upon our heads like fire, and raising salt blisters in those parts which were not completely covered. Our feet and legs, from standing in the salt water for so many hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone, afflicting the sufferers with great torment. We came home at twelve; ate our corn soup, called *blawly*, as fast as we

could, and went back to our employment till dark at night. We then shovelled up the salt in large heaps, and went down to the sea, where we washed the pickle from our limbs, and cleaned the barrows and shovels from the salt. When we returned to the house, our master gave us each our allowance of raw Indian corn, which we pounded in a mortar and boiled in water for our suppers.

We slept in a long shed, divided into narrow slips, like the stalls used for cattle. Boards fixed upon stakes driven into the ground, without mat or covering, were our only beds. On Sundays, after we had washed the salt bags, and done other work required of us, we went into the bush and cut the long soft grass, of which we made trusses for our legs and feet to rest upon, for they were so full of the salt boils that we could get no rest lying upon the bare boards.

Though we worked from morning till night, there was no satisfying Mr. D—. <sup>7</sup> I hoped, when I left Capt. I—, that I should have been better off, but I found it was but going from one butcher to another. There was this difference between them: my former master used to beat me while raging and foaming with passion; Mr. D— was usually quite calm. He would stand by and give orders for a slave to be cruelly whipped, and assist in the punishment, without moving a muscle of his face; walking about and taking snuff with the greatest composure. Nothing could touch his hard heart—neither sighs, nor tears, nor prayers, nor streaming blood; he was deaf to our cries, and careless of our sufferings.—Mr. D— has often stripped me naked, hung me up by the wrists, and beat me with the cow-skin, <sup>8</sup> with his own hand, till my body was raw with gashes. Yet there was nothing very remarkable in this; for it might serve as a sample of the common usage of the slaves on that horrible island. \*

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My old master <sup>9</sup> often got drunk, and then he would get in a fury with his daughter, and beat her till she was not fit to be seen. I remember on one occasion, I had gone to fetch water, and when I was coming up the hill I heard a great screaming; I ran as fast as I could to the house, put down the water, and went into the chamber, where I found my master beating Miss D— dreadfully. I strove with

all my strength to get her away from him; for she was all black and blue with bruises. He had beat her with his fist, and almost killed her. The people gave me credit for getting her away. He turned round and began to lick me. Then I said, "Sir, this is not Turk's Island." I can't repeat his answer, the words were too wicked—too bad to say. He wanted to treat me the same in Bermuda as he had done in Turk's Island.

He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me. One time I had plates and knives in my hand, and I dropped both plates and knives, and some of the plates were broken. He struck me so severely for this, that at last I defended myself, for I thought it was high time to do so. I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man—very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh. So I went away to a neighbouring house and sat down and cried till the next morning, when I went home again, not knowing what else to do.

After that I was hired to work at Cedar Hills, and every Saturday night I paid the money to my master. I had plenty of work to do there—plenty of washing; but yet I made myself pretty comfortable. I earned two dollars and a quarter a week, which is twenty pence a day.

During the time I worked there, I heard that Mr. John Wood was going to Antigua. I felt a great wish to go there, and I went to Mr. D —, and asked him to let me go in Mr. Wood's service. Mr. Wood did not then want to purchase me; it was my own fault that I came under him, I was so anxious to go. It was ordained to be, I suppose; God led me there. The truth is, I did not wish to be any longer the slave of my indecent master.<sup>1</sup>

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I still live in the hope that God will find a way to give me my liberty, and give me back to my husband. I endeavour to keep down my fretting, and to leave all to Him, for he knows what is good for me better than I know myself. Yet, I must confess, I find it a hard and heavy task to do so.

I am often much vexed, and I feel great sorrow when I hear some people in this country say, that the slaves do not need better usage, and do not want to be free.<sup>2</sup> They believe the foreign people,<sup>3</sup> who deceive them, and say slaves are happy. I say, Not so. How can slaves be happy when they have the halter round their neck and the whip upon their back? and are disgraced and thought no more of than beasts?—and are separated from their mothers, and husbands, and children, and sisters, just as cattle are sold and separated? Is it happiness for a driver in the field to take down his wife or sister or child, and strip them, and whip them in such a disgraceful manner?—women that have had children exposed in the open field to shame! There is no modesty or decency shown by the owner to his slaves; men, women, and children are exposed alike. Since I have been here. I have often wondered how English people can go out into the West Indies and act in such a beastly manner. But when they go to the West Indies, they forget God and all feeling of shame, I think, since they can see and do such things. They tie up slaves like hogs—moor<sup>4</sup> them up like cattle, and they lick them, so as hogs, or cattle, or horses never were flogged;—and yet they come home and say, and make some good people believe, that slaves don't want to get out of slavery. But they put a cloak about the truth. It is not so. All slaves want to be free—to be free is very sweet. I will say the truth to English people who may read this history that my good friend, Miss S——,<sup>5</sup> is now writing down for me. I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery—that they don't want to be free—that man is either ignorant or a lying person. I never heard a slave say so. I never heard a Buckra man<sup>6</sup> say so, till I heard tell of it in England. Such people ought to be ashamed of

themselves. They can't do without slaves, they say. What's the reason they can't do without slaves as well as in England? No slaves here—no whips—no stocks—no punishment, except for wicked people. They hire servants in England; and if they don't like them, they send them away: they can't lick them. Let them work ever so hard in England, they are far better off than slaves. If they get a bad master, they give warning and go hire to another. They have their liberty. That's just what *we* want. We don't mind hard work, if we had proper treatment, and proper wages like English servants, and proper time given in the week to keep us from breaking the Sabbath. But they won't give it: they will have work—work—work, night and day, sick or well, till we are quite done up; and we must not speak up nor look amiss, however much we be abused. And then when we are quite done up, who cares for us, more than for a lame horse? This is slavery. I tell it, to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for evermore.

1831

## Endnotes

- Note 1: At this point in her narrative, Prince has been parted from her mother and siblings, Mrs. Williams having been unable to afford her keep. Aged twelve, she has been hired out to a neighboring family, the Prudens, to tend to their baby and has grown fond of him and his brother James and sister Fanny.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Coarse linen or cotton clothing reserved for enslaved people or servants.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Hamilton, the capital of Bermuda.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Auctioneer.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Bermuda currency: about £38 sterling [*Pringle's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: Taken from Bermuda to Grand Turk Island, Prince would for a decade form part of the workforce that harvested salt from the *salinas*, catchments for sea water.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In the Preface Pringle explains that he has suppressed the names of some of Prince's owners, Mr. D— among them, for fear of disturbing their surviving relations. To what extent the *History* is also marked by acts of censorship that are less visible is a much debated question. It seems likely that some details in Prince's oral account, especially those involving her sexual exploitation by her masters, were omitted when it was set down in writing.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A type of whip.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Returned to Bermuda, Prince is once again the property of Robert Darrell, her "old master." [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In the omitted portion of her *History* that follows Prince recounts how with the Woods, for whom she had been working as a charwoman and washerwoman, she left the Caribbean island of Antigua for London, where she eventually met the Pringles.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The whole of this paragraph especially, is given as nearly as was possible in Mary's precise words [*Pringle's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: She means West Indians [*Pringle's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A West Indian phrase: to fasten or tie up [*Pringle's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Susanna Strickland (1803–1885), better known by her married name, Susanna Moodie. In 1832, after her marriage to John Moodie, she emigrated to Ontario, where she earned fame as the author of several books documenting life in the Canadian colony.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: White man.[Return to reference 6](#)



# CHARLES LAMB

## 1775–1834

Charles Lamb was a near contemporary of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He numbered these two poets among his close friends, published his own early poems in combination with those of Coleridge in 1796 and 1797, and supported the *Lyrical Ballads* and some of the other new poetry of his time. Yet Lamb lacks almost all the traits and convictions we think of as characteristically "Romantic." He happily lived all his life in the city and its environs. He could not abide Shelley or his poetry, and he distrusted Coleridge's supernaturalism and Wordsworth's oracular sublimities and religion of nature, preferring those elements in their poems that were human and realistic. In an age when many of the important writers were fervent radicals and some became equally fervent reactionaries, Lamb remained uncommitted in both politics and religion, and although on intimate terms with such dedicated reformers as William Hazlitt, William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft, and Leigh Hunt, he chose them as friends, as he said, not for their opinions but "for some individuality of character which they manifested." In his own writings he shared Wordsworth's concern with memories' power to transform the present moment and, like him, interjected a sense of the ideal into his representations of the actual and everyday. "The streets of London," Hazlitt wrote, assessing the essays Lamb published under the pseudonym Elia in the *London Magazine*, "are his fairy-land, teeming with wonder, with



life and interest to his retrospective glance, as it did to the eager eye of childhood.”

Lamb was born in London at the Inner Temple, center of the English legal profession. His father, who began his working life as a footman, was assistant to a lawyer there. His paternal as well as maternal grandparents were servants. At the age of seven he entered Christ’s Hospital, the school Coleridge also attended. Childhood ended early. He left the school before he was fifteen and soon thereafter became a clerk in the accounting department of the East India Company, a huge commercial house, where he remained for thirty-three years. His adult life was quiet and unadventurous, but under its calm surface lay great tragedy. When he was twenty-two his beloved sister, Mary, ten years his senior, exhausted by her labors as a dressmaker and the work of caring for her invalid parents, began to show signs of a breakdown. One day she turned in a manic rage on the little girl who was her apprentice. When Mrs. Lamb tried to intercede, her daughter stabbed her in the heart. The jury’s verdict was lunacy, but the intercession of her father’s former employer spared Mary permanent confinement in an asylum. Instead, she was remanded to the custody of Charles, who devoted the rest of his life to her and their common household. Mary’s attacks of insanity recurred, and when the terribly familiar symptoms began to show themselves, Charles and Mary would walk arm in arm and weeping to the asylum, carrying a straitjacket with them.

Most of the time, however, Mary was her normally serene and gracious self, and shared her brother’s love of company and genius for friendship. The evening gatherings at the Lambs’ attracted a varied company that included many of the leading writers and artists of England. Charles drew furiously on a pipe of strong tobacco and drank copiously; as the alcohol eased his habitual stammer, his puns and practical jokes grew ever more outrageous. He had, in fact, a complex temperament, in which the playfulness overlay a somber melancholy and the eccentricity sometimes manifested a touch of malice.

To supplement his salary at the East India House, Lamb had early turned to writing in a variety of literary forms: sonnets; blank verse; a sentimental novel; a tragedy; and a farce, *Mr. H—*, which was hissed by the audience, including its honest author, when it was produced at Drury Lane (the uneasiness with the theater that informs his essay “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare” probably reflects this experience). He also collaborated with his sister, Mary, on a series of children’s books, including the excellent *Tales from Shakespeare*, and wrote some brilliant critical commentaries in his anthology, important for the Elizabethan revival of that period, titled *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Who Lived about the Time of Shakespeare*. Not until 1820, however, at the age of forty-five, did Lamb discover the form that would make his name, when he began to write essays for John Scott’s new *London Magazine*.

Lamb’s achievement in those contributions to the *London* was to accommodate the intimacies of the familiar essay, a genre dating back to Montaigne in the sixteenth century, to a modern world of magazine writing that aimed to reach a general public. The *Essays of Elia* make the magazine—an impersonal medium that contributed conspicuously to the information overload of the age—appear to be a forum in which a reader might really *know* an author. A sense of the paradoxes of that project—a sense that the illusions of personality in the personal essay might be easily debunked—is never far away in Lamb’s writings, lending a fascinating edge to their charm and complicating the autobiographical impulse that seems to link them to the works of his contemporaries. Under the pseudonym Elia, which, Lamb said, was the name of an Italian clerk he had known briefly while employed in the South Sea House, Lamb projects in his essays the character of a man who is whimsical but strong-willed, self-deprecating yet self-absorbed, with strong likes and dislikes, a specialist in nostalgia and in that humor which balances delicately on the verge of pathos. But Elia is also, as Lamb noted, an anagram for “a lie”: the essays’ seemingly unguarded self-revelation is intertwined with the cunning of a deliberate and dedicated artist in prose. And to write about himself Lamb developed

a prose style that was colored throughout by archaic words and expressions that continually alluded to literary precursors, including the works of other eccentrics such as Robert Burton and Laurence Sterne—as if he were suggesting that he was most distinctively himself when most immersed in his beloved old books.

# Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading<sup>1</sup>

To mind the inside of a book is to entertain one's self with the forced product of another man's brain. Now I think a man of quality and breeding may be much amused with the natural sprouts of his own.

—Lord Foppington in *The Relapse*<sup>2</sup>

An ingenious acquaintance of my own was so much struck with this bright sally of his Lordship, that he has left off reading altogether, to the great improvement of his originality. At the hazard of losing some credit on this head, I must confess that I dedicate no inconsiderable portion of my time to other people's thoughts. I dream away my life in others' speculations. I love to lose myself in other men's minds. When I am not walking, I am reading; I cannot sit and think. Books think for me.

I have no repugnances. Shaftesbury is not too genteel for me, nor Jonathan Wild too low.<sup>3</sup> I can read any thing which I call a *book*. There are things in that shape which I cannot allow for such.

In this catalogue of *books which are no books—biblia a-biblia*—I reckon Court Calendars, Directories, Pocket Books, Draught Boards bound and lettered at the back, Scientific Treatises, Almanacks, Statutes at Large; the works of Hume, Gibbon, Robertson, Beattie, Soame Jenyns, and, generally, all those volumes which “no gentleman's library should be without”:<sup>4</sup> the Histories of Flavius Josephus (that learned Jew), and Paley's *Moral Philosophy*.<sup>5</sup> With these exceptions, I can read almost any thing. I bless my stars for a taste so catholic, so unexcluding.

I confess that it moves my spleen to see these *things in books' clothing* perched upon shelves, like false saints, usurpers of true shrines, intruders into the sanctuary, thrusting out the legitimate occupants. To reach down a well-bound semblance of a volume, and

hope it is some kind-hearted play-book, then, opening what “seem its leaves,” to come bolt upon a withering Population Essay.<sup>6</sup> To expect a Steele, or a Farquhar, and find—Adam Smith.<sup>7</sup> To view a well-arranged assortment of blockheaded Encyclopaedias (Anglicanas or Metropolitanas) set out in an array of Russia, or Morocco,<sup>8</sup> when a tithe of that good leather would comfortably re-clothe my shivering folios; would renovate Paracelsus himself, and enable old Raymund Lully to look like himself again in the world.<sup>9</sup> I never see these impostors, but I long to strip them, to warm my ragged veterans in their spoils.

To be strong-backed and neat-bound is the desideratum of a volume. Magnificence comes after. This, when it can be afforded, is not to be lavished upon all kinds of books indiscriminately. I would not dress a set of Magazines, for instance, in full suit. The dishabille,<sup>1</sup> or half-binding (with Russia backs ever) is *our* costume. A Shakespeare, or a Milton (unless the first editions), it were mere foppery to trick out in gay apparel. The possession of them confers no distinction. The exterior of them (the things themselves being so common), strange to say, raises no sweet emotions, no tickling sense of property in the owner. Thomson’s *Seasons*,<sup>2</sup> again, looks best (I maintain it) a little torn, and dog’s-eared. How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are the sullied leaves, and worn out appearance, nay, the very odour (beyond Russia), if we would not forget kind feelings in fastidiousness, of an old “Circulating Library” *Tom Jones*, or *Vicar of Wakefield*!<sup>3</sup> How they speak of the thousand thumbs, that have turned over their pages with delight!—of the lone sempstress, whom they may have cheered (milliner, or harder-working mantuamaker<sup>4</sup>) after her long day’s needle-toil, running far into midnight, when she has snatched an hour, ill spared from sleep, to steep her cares, as in some Lethean cup,<sup>5</sup> in spelling out their enchanting contents! Who would have them a whit less soiled? What better condition could we desire to see them in?

In some respects the better a book is, the less it demands from binding. Fielding, Smollet, Sterne,<sup>6</sup> and all that class of perpetually

self-reproductive volumes—Great Nature's Stereotypes<sup>7</sup>—we see them individually perish with less regret, because we know the copies of them to be "eterne."<sup>8</sup> But where a book is at once both good and rare—where the individual is almost the species, and when *that* perishes,

We know not where is that Promethean torch  
That can its light relumine—<sup>9</sup>

such a book, for instance, as the *Life of the Duke of Newcastle*, by his Duchess<sup>1</sup>—no casket is rich enough, no casing sufficiently durable, to honour and keep safe such a jewel.

Not only rare volumes of this description, which seem hopeless ever to be reprinted; but old editions of writers, such as Sir Philip Sydney, Bishop Taylor,<sup>2</sup> Milton in his prose-works, Fuller<sup>3</sup>—of whom we *have* reprints, yet the books themselves, though they go about, and are talked of here and there, we know, have not endenized themselves (nor possibly ever will) in the national heart, so as to become stock books—it is good to possess these in durable and costly covers. I do not care for a First Folio of Shakespeare. I rather prefer the common editions of Rowe and Tonson, without notes, and with *plates*, which, being so execrably bad, serve as maps, or modest remembrancers, to the text; and without pretending to any supposable emulation with it, are so much better than the Shakespeare gallery *engravings*, which *did*.<sup>4</sup> I have a community of feeling with my countrymen about his Plays, and I like those editions of him best, which have been oftenest tumbled about and handled.—On the contrary, I cannot read Beaumont and Fletcher but in Folio. The Octavo editions are painful to look at.<sup>5</sup> I have no sympathy with them. If they were as much read as the current editions of the other poet, I should prefer them in that shape to the older one. I do not know a more heartless sight than the reprint of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*.<sup>6</sup> What need was there of unearthing the bones of that fantastic old great man, to expose them in a winding-sheet of the newest fashion to modern censure? what hapless stationer could

dream of Burton ever becoming popular?—The wretched Malone could not do worse, when he bribed the sexton of Stratford church to let him white-wash the painted effigy of old Shakespeare,<sup>7</sup> which stood there, in rude but lively fashion depicted, to the very colour of the cheek, the eye, the eye-brow, hair, the very dress he used to wear—the only authentic testimony we had, however imperfect, of these curious parts and parcels of him. They covered him over with a coat of white paint. By —, if I had been a justice of peace for Warwickshire, I would have clapt both commentator and sexton fast in the stocks, for a pair of meddling sacrilegious varlets.

I think I see them at their work—these sapient trouble-tombs.

Shall I be thought fantastical, if I confess, that the names of some of our poets sound sweeter, and have a finer relish to the ear—to mine, at least—than that of Milton or of Shakespeare? It may be, that the latter are more staled and rung upon in common discourse. The sweetest names, and which carry a perfume in the mention, are, Kit Marlowe, Drayton, Drummond of Hawthornden, and Cowley.<sup>8</sup>

Much depends upon *when* and *where* you read a book. In the five or six impatient minutes, before the dinner is quite ready, who would think of taking up the *Fairy Queen* for a stopgap, or a volume of Bishop Andrewes' sermons?<sup>9</sup>

Milton almost requires a solemn service of music to be played before you enter upon him. But he brings his music, to which, who listens, had need bring docile thoughts, and purged ears.

Winter evenings—the world shut out—with less of ceremony the gentle Shakespeare enters. At such a season, the *Tempest*, or his own *Winter's Tale*—

These two poets you cannot avoid reading aloud—to yourself, or (as it chances) to some single person listening. More than one—and it degenerates into an audience.

Books of quick interest, that hurry on for incidents, are for the eye to glide over only. It will not do to read them out. I could never listen to even the better kind of modern novels without extreme irksomeness.

A newspaper, read out, is intolerable. In some of the Bank offices it is the custom (to save so much individual time) for one of the clerks—who is the best scholar—to commence upon the Times, or the Chronicle, and recite its entire contents aloud *pro bono publico*.<sup>1</sup> With every advantage of lungs and elocution, the effect is singularly vapid. In barbers' shops and public-houses a fellow will get up, and spell out a paragraph, which he communicates as some discovery. Another follows with *his* selection. So the entire journal transpires at length by piece-meal. Seldom-readers are slow readers, and, without this expedient no one in the company would probably ever travel through the contents of a whole paper.

Newspapers always excite curiosity. No one ever lays one down without a feeling of disappointment.

What an eternal time that gentleman in black, at Nando's,<sup>2</sup> keeps the paper! I am sick of hearing the waiter bawling out incessantly, "the Chronicle is in hand, Sir."

Coming in to an inn at night—having ordered your supper—what can be more delightful than to find lying in the window-seat, left there time out of mind by the carelessness of some former guest—two or three numbers of the old Town and Country Magazine, with its amusing *tête-à-tête* pictures—"The Royal Lover and Lady G—"; "The Melting Platonic and the old Beau,"—and such like antiquated scandal? Would you exchange it—at that time, and in that place—for a better book?

Poor Tobin, who latterly fell blind, did not regret it so much for the weightier kinds of reading—the *Paradise Lost*, or *Comus*, he could have *read* to him—but he missed the pleasure of skimming over with his own eye a magazine, or a light pamphlet.

I should not care to be caught in the serious avenues of some cathedral alone, and reading *Candide*.<sup>3</sup>

I do not remember a more whimsical surprise than having been once detected—by a familiar damsel—reclined at my ease upon the grass, on Primrose Hill (her Cythera),<sup>4</sup> reading—*Pamela*.<sup>5</sup> There was nothing in the book to make a man seriously ashamed at the exposure; but as she seated herself down by me, and seemed



determined to read in company, I could have wished it had been—any other book. We read on very sociably for a few pages; and, not finding the author much to her taste, she got up, and—went away. Gentle casuist, I leave it to thee to conjecture, whether the blush (for there was one between us) was the property of the nymph or the swain in this dilemma. From me you shall never get the secret.

I am not much a friend to out-of-doors reading. I cannot settle my spirits to it. I knew a Unitarian minister, who was generally to be seen upon Snowhill (as yet Skinner's-street *was not*), between the hours of ten and eleven in the morning, studying a volume of Lardner.<sup>6</sup> I own this to have been a strain of abstraction beyond my reach. I used to admire how he sidled along, keeping clear of secular contacts. An illiterate encounter with a porter's knot,<sup>7</sup> or a bread basket, would have quickly put to flight all the theology I am master of, and have left me worse than indifferent to the five points.<sup>8</sup>

There is a class of street-readers, whom I can never contemplate without affection—the poor gentry, who, not having wherewithal to buy or hire a book, filch a little learning at the open stalls—the owner, with his hard eye, casting envious looks at them all the while, and thinking when they will have done. Venturing tenderly, page after page, expecting every moment when he shall interpose his interdict, and yet unable to deny themselves the gratification, they “snatch a fearful joy.”<sup>9</sup> Martin B——,<sup>1</sup> in this way, by daily fragments, got through two volumes of *Clarissa*,<sup>2</sup> when the stallkeeper damped his laudable ambition, by asking him (it was in his younger days) whether he meant to purchase the work. M. declares, that under no circumstances of his life did he ever peruse a book with half the satisfaction which he took in those uneasy snatches. A quaint poetess of our day<sup>3</sup> has moralised upon this subject in two very touching but homely stanzas.

I saw a boy with eager eye  
Open a book upon a stall,  
And read, as he'd devour it all;

Which when the stall-man did espy,  
Soon to the boy I heard him call,  
"You, Sir, you never buy a book,  
Therefore in one you shall not look."  
The boy pass'd slowly on, and with a sigh  
He wish'd he never had been taught to read,  
Then of the old churl's books he should have had no  
need.

Of sufferings the poor have many,  
Which never can the rich annoy:  
I soon perceiv'd another boy,  
Who look'd as if he'd not had any  
Food, for that day at least—enjoy  
The sight of cold meat in a tavern larder.  
This boy's case, then thought I, is surely harder,  
Thus hungry, longing, thus without a penny,  
Beholding choice of dainty-dressed meat:  
No wonder if he wish he ne'er had learn'd to eat.

1822

1833

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Published in the *London Magazine*, July 1822, and revised for *Last Essays of Elia* (1833), Lamb's essay, although often tongue in cheek, shrewdly challenges the hierarchies the era's reviewers and others used to rank different kinds of writing and sort out good, tasteful readers from bad. Elia's fondness for novels from circulating libraries is as unusual as his willingness to present himself as a receptive reader first and an original author second. For a contrast to his bookishness, see Wordsworth's "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned" (pp. 330–31 in this volume). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The would-be man of fashion in Sir John Vanbrugh's comedy of 1696, *The Relapse*. [Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Two extremes in 18th-century prose: the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), philosopher and essayist, and the gang leader who inspired Henry Fielding's 1743 crime novel *Jonathan Wild the Great*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Elia's list begins with the types of books sold by stationers and ends with those authored by venerated and prolific moralists, philosophers, and historians of the 18th century.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: William Paley (1743–1805), theologian and philosopher. Josephus (37–100 C.E.), historian of the Jewish people.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published 1798, had by 1822 been through several editions and prompted several responses, including ones by Lamb's friends Godwin and Hazlitt.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The early 18th-century dramatists Richard Steele and George Farquhar, contrasted with the author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Russia and Morocco are two varieties of leather used in bookbinding.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Paracelsus (1493–1541) and Ramon Lully (1235–1317), authors with connections to alchemy—the search for the philosopher's stone, which could transmute base metals into gold, and for the elixir of life.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Negligent or casual dress.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: James Thomson's widely read poem of natural description, published in 1730.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Novels by Henry Fielding and Oliver Goldsmith, published in 1748 and 1766.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Dressmaker. "Milliner": bonnet maker. Mary Lamb, a great reader of novels borrowed from circulating libraries, was a mantua-maker.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The waters of the river Lethe, which flowed through Hades, caused forgetfulness.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The novelists Tobias Smollett (1721–1771) and Laurence Sterne (1713–1768).[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Refers to the molds that at the start of the 19th century had begun to be employed in the printing process, considerably enhancing the speed and efficiency of book production.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Lady Macbeth, suggesting the killing of Banquo and Fleance: “in them nature’s copy’s not eterne” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 3.2.39).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Compare Othello’s words as he contemplates Desdemona’s murder (Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.12–13).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The 1667 biography of her husband by the poet and playwright Margaret Cavendish.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667), author of *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Anglican clergyman and antiquarian Thomas Fuller (1608–1661).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Illustrations by leading English artists were provided for the deluxe edition of Shakespeare issued by the print seller John Boydell in 1802. Elia favors the editions that were prepared by Nicholas Rowe and his publisher Jacob Tonson starting in 1709.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Francis Beaumont (1585?–1616) and John Fletcher (1579–1625), Elizabeth dramatists and collaborators. Lamb’s folio edition of their works is also mentioned in “Old China.” Folio editions are distinguished from octavo by size: folio is the largest format for books, produced when a full-sized printer’s sheet is folded once, whereas an octavo book is sized for pages folded so that each is one-eighth the size of a full sheet. By Lamb’s day, book formats were to an extent correlated with their contents: the more cultural authority granted the type of literature or the author, the larger the format.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Robert Burton’s vast treatise from 1621; there was an 1800 reprint. Burton’s unmethodical, motley prose, which seemingly broaches a thousand topics to take on one, gave

Lamb a model for his style in the Elia essays.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Shakespeare editor Edmond Malone (1741–1812). The repainting of Shakespeare’s bust occurred in 1793.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Poet and dramatist Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) and poets Michael Drayton (1563–1631), William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649), and Abraham Cowley (1610–1667).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Launcelot Andrewes (1551–1626).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: For the common good (Latin).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Coffeehouse in London’s Fleet Street.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Voltaire, the author of the satirical *Candide, or Optimism* (1759), was notorious for his freethinking in religious matters.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Greek island sacred to the goddess of love. Primrose Hill is a green space in north London.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Samuel Richardson’s 1740 novel in letters chronicling the failed seduction of a very virtuous maidservant.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Theologian Nathaniel Lardner (1684–1768).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The padded yoke a London market porter wore to help him carry his burden.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The five points of Calvinist belief: Original Sin, Predestination, Irresistible Grace, Particular Redemption, and the Final Perseverance of the Saints.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Compare the description of schoolboys’ play in Thomas Gray’s 1742 “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” (line 40).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The Lambs’ friend Martin Burney, nephew of the novelist Frances Burney.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A million-word novel, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747–48) took up seven volumes.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Mary Lamb. The poem had appeared earlier in the Lambs' *Poetry for Children* (1809).[Return to reference 3](#)

## Old China

I have an almost feminine partiality for old china. When I go to see any great house, I inquire for the china closet, and next for the picture gallery. I cannot defend the order of preference, but by saying that we have all some taste or other, of too ancient a date to admit of our remembering distinctly that it was an acquired one. I can call to mind the first play, and the first exhibition, that I was taken to; but I am not conscious of a time when china jars and saucers were introduced into my imagination.

I had no repugnance then—why should I now have?—to those little, lawless, azure-tinctured grotesques, that under the notion of men and women float about, uncircumscribed by any element, in that world before perspective—a china teacup.

I like to see my old friends—whom distance cannot diminish—figuring up in the air (so they appear to our optics), yet on terra firma still—for so we must in courtesy interpret that speck of deeper blue, which the decorous artist, to prevent absurdity, had made to spring up beneath their sandals.

I love the men with women's faces, and the women, if possible, with still more womanish expressions.

Here is a young and courtly mandarin, handing tea to a lady from a salver—two miles off. See how distance seems to set off respect! And here the same lady, or another—for likeness is identity on teacups—is stepping into a little fairy boat, moored on the hither side of this calm garden river, with a dainty mincing foot, which in a right angle of incidence (as angles go in our world) must infallibly land her in the midst of a flowery mead—a furlong off on the other side of the same strange stream!

Farther on—if far or near can be predicated of their world—see horses, trees, pagodas, dancing the hays.<sup>1</sup>

Here—a cow and rabbit couchant,<sup>2</sup> and coextensive—so objects show, seen through the lucid atmosphere of fine Cathay.<sup>3</sup>

I was pointing out to my cousin last evening, over our Hyson<sup>4</sup> (which we are old-fashioned enough to drink unmixed still of an afternoon), some of these *speciosa miracula*<sup>5</sup> upon a set of extraordinary old blue china (a recent purchase) which we were now for the first time using; and could not help remarking how favorable circumstances had been to us of late years that we could afford to please the eye sometimes with trifles of this sort—when a passing sentiment seemed to overshadow the brows of my companion. I am quick at detecting these summer clouds in Bridget.<sup>6</sup>

“I wish the good old times would come again,” she said, “when we were not quite so rich. I do not mean that I want to be poor; but there was a middle state”—so she was pleased to ramble on—“in which I am sure we were a great deal happier. A purchase is but a purchase, now that you have money enough and to spare. Formerly it used to be a triumph. When we coveted a cheap luxury (and, O! how much ado I had to get you to consent in those times!)—we were used to have a debate two or three days before, and to weigh the *for* and *against*, and think what we might spare it out of, and what saving we could hit upon, that should be an equivalent. A thing was worth buying then, when we felt the money that we paid for it.

“Do you remember the brown suit, which you made to hang upon you, till all your friends cried shame upon you, it grew so threadbare—and all because of that folio Beaumont and Fletcher,<sup>7</sup> which you dragged home late at night from Barker’s in Covent Garden? Do you remember how we eyed it for weeks before we could make up our minds to the purchase, and had not come to a determination till it was near ten o’clock of the Saturday night, when you set off from Islington,<sup>8</sup> fearing you should be too late—and when the old bookseller with some grumbling opened his shop, and by the twinkling taper (for he was setting bedwards) lighted out the relic from his dusty treasures—and when you lugged it home, wishing it were twice as cumbersome—and when you presented it to



me—and when we were exploring the perfectness of it (*collating*, you called it)—and while I was repairing some of these loose leaves with paste, which your impatience would not suffer to be left till daybreak—was there no pleasure in being a poor man? or can those neat black clothes which you wear now, and are so careful to keep brushed, since we have become rich and finical, give you half the honest vanity with which you flaunted it about in that overworn suit—your old corbeau<sup>9</sup>—for four or five weeks longer than you should have done, to pacify your conscience for the mighty sum of fifteen—or sixteen shillings was it?—a great affair we thought it then—which you had lavished on the old folio. Now you can afford to buy any book that pleases you, but I do not see that you ever bring me home any nice old purchases now.

“When you came home with twenty apologies for laying out a less number of shillings upon that print after Leonardo,<sup>1</sup> which we christened the ‘Lady Blanch’; when you looked at the purchase, and thought of the money—and thought of the money, and looked again at the picture—was there no pleasure in being a poor man? Now, you have nothing to do but to walk into Colnaghi’s,<sup>2</sup> and buy a wilderness of Leonardos. Yet do you?

“Then, do you remember our pleasant walks to Enfield, and Potter’s Bar, and Waltham,<sup>3</sup> when we had a holiday—holidays, and all other fun, are gone now we are rich—and the little hand-basket in which I used to deposit our day’s fare of savory cold lamb and salad—and how you would pry about at noontide for some decent house, where we might go in and produce our store—only paying for the ale that you must call for—and speculate upon the looks of the landlady, and whether she was likely to allow us a tablecloth—and wish for such another honest hostess as Izaak Walton has described many a one on the pleasant banks of the Lea, when he went a-fishing—and sometimes they would prove obliging enough, and sometimes they would look grudgingly upon us—but we had cheerful looks still for one another, and would eat our plain food savorily, scarcely grudging Piscator<sup>4</sup> his Trout Hall? Now—when we go out a day’s pleasuring, which is seldom, moreover, we *ride* part of

the way—and go into a fine inn, and order the best of dinners, never debating the expense—which, after all, never has half the relish of those chance country snaps,<sup>5</sup> when we were at the mercy of uncertain usage and a precarious welcome.

“You are too proud to see a play anywhere now but in the pit. Do you remember where it was we used to sit, when we saw the *Battle of Hexham*, and the *Surrender of Calais*,<sup>6</sup> and Bannister and Mrs. Bland in the *Children in the Wood*<sup>7</sup>—when we squeezed out our shillings apiece to sit three or four times in a season in the one-shilling gallery—where you felt all the time that you ought not to have brought me—and more strongly I felt obligation to you for having brought me—and the pleasure was the better for a little shame—and when the curtain drew up, what cared we for our place in the house, or what mattered it where we were sitting, when our thoughts were with Rosalind in Arden, or with Viola at the Court of Ilyria.<sup>8</sup> You used to say that the gallery was the best place of all for enjoying a play socially—that the relish of such exhibitions must be in proportion to the infrequency of going—that the company we met there, not being in general readers of plays, were obliged to attend the more, and did attend, to what was going on, on the stage—because a word lost would have been a chasm, which it was impossible for them to fill up. With such reflections we consoled our pride then—and I appeal to you whether, as a woman, I met generally with less attention and accommodation than I have done since in more expensive situations in the house? The getting in indeed, and the crowding up those inconvenient staircases, was bad enough—but there was still a law of civility to woman recognized to quite as great an extent as we ever found in the other passages—and how a little difficulty overcome heightened the snug seat and the play, afterwards! Now we can only pay our money and walk in. You cannot see, you say, in the galleries now. I am sure we saw, and heard too, well enough then—but sight, and all, I think, is gone with our poverty.

“There was pleasure in eating strawberries, before they became quite common—in the first dish of peas, while they were yet dear—

to have them for a nice supper, a treat. What treat can we have now? If we were to treat ourselves now—that is, to have dainties a little above our means, it would be selfish and wicked. It is the very little more that we allow ourselves beyond what the actual poor can get at that makes what I call a treat—when two people living together, as we have done, now and then indulge themselves in a cheap luxury, which both like; while each apologizes, and is willing to take both halves of the blame to his single share. I see no harm in people making much of themselves, in that sense of the word. It may give them a hint how to make much of others. But now—what I mean by the word—we never do make much of ourselves. None but the poor can do it. I do not mean the veriest poor of all, but persons as we were, just above poverty.

“I know what you were going to say, that it is mighty pleasant at the end of the year to make all meet—and much ado we used to have every Thirty-first Night of December to account for our exceedings—many a long face did you make over your puzzled accounts, and in contriving to make it out how we had spent so much—or that we had not spent so much—or that it was impossible we should spend so much next year—and still we found our slender capital decreasing—but then, betwixt ways, and projects, and compromises of one sort or another, and talk of curtailing this charge, and doing without that for the future—and the hope that youth brings, and laughing spirits (in which you were never poor till now), we pocketed up our loss, and in conclusion, with ‘lusty brimmers’ (as you used to quote it out of *hearty cheerful Mr. Cotton*,<sup>9</sup> as you called him), we used to welcome in ‘the coming guest.’ Now we have no reckoning at all at the end of the old year—no flattering promises about the new year doing better for us.”

Bridget is so sparing of her speech on most occasions that when she gets into a rhetorical vein, I am careful how I interrupt it. I could not help, however, smiling at the phantom of wealth which her dear imagination had conjured up out of a clear income of poor — hundred pounds a year. “It is true we were happier when we were poorer, but we were also younger, my cousin. I am afraid we must

put up with the excess, for if we were to shake the superflux into the sea, we should not much mend ourselves. That we had much to struggle with, as we grew up together, we have reason to be most thankful. It strengthened and knit our compact closer. We could never have been what we have been to each other, if we had always had the sufficiency which you now complain of. The resisting power—those natural dilations of the youthful spirit, which circumstances cannot straiten—with us are long since passed away. Competence to age is supplementary youth, a sorry supplement indeed, but I fear the best that is to be had. We must ride where we formerly walked: live better and lie softer—and shall be wise to do so—than we had means to do in those good old days you speak of. Yet could those days return—could you and I once more walk our thirty miles a day—could Bannister and Mrs. Bland again be young, and you and I be young to see them—could the good old one-shilling gallery days return—they are dreams, my cousin, now—but could you and I at this moment, instead of this quiet argument, by our well-carpeted fireside, sitting on this luxurious sofa—be once more struggling up those inconvenient staircases, pushed about, and squeezed, and elbowed by the poorest rabble of poor gallery scramblers—could I once more hear those anxious shrieks of yours—and the delicious *Thank God, we are safe*, which always followed when the topmost stair, conquered, let in the first light of the whole cheerful theater down beneath us—I know not the fathom line that ever touched a descent so deep as I would be willing to bury more wealth in than Croesus had, or the great Jew R——<sup>1</sup> is supposed to have, to purchase it. And now do just look at that merry little Chinese waiter holding an umbrella, big enough for a bed-tester,<sup>2</sup> over the head of that pretty insipid half Madonnaish chit of a lady in that very blue summerhouse.”

1823

1823

## Endnotes

- Note 1: An English country dance.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Lying down with the head raised (term from heraldry).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The old European name for China.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A Chinese green tea.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Shining wonders (Latin).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In Lamb's essays, his name for his sister, Mary.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Elizabethan dramatic collaborators, whose plays were first collected in a large folio volume in 1647.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In the north of London, where the Lambs had been living.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A dark green cloth, almost black (hence its name, the French for raven).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), the great Italian painter. The painting is the one known as *Modesty and Vanity*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Colnaghi was a London print seller. In the issue of the *London Magazine* in which "Old China" first appeared, the artist Thomas Griffiths Wainewright (using the signature "C. van Vinkboom") works some advice for Colnaghi into his essay: namely, to immediately "import a few impressions . . . of those beautiful plates from Da Vinci," including "Miss Lamb's favourite, 'Lady Blanche,' " as he foresees that this issue "will occasion a considerable call for them."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: All three are suburbs to the north of London.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The fisherman in Izaak Walton's *Complete Angler* (1653).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Snacks.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Comedies by George Colman (1762–1836).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: By Thomas Morton (1764–1838).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Rosalind in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Viola in his *Twelfth Night*.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Charles Cotton (1630–1687), a favorite poet of Lamb's. The quotations are from his poem "The New Year." "Lusty brimmers": glasses filled to the brim.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Nathan Meyer Rothschild (1777–1836), founder of the English branch of the great European banking house.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Bed canopy.[Return to reference 2](#)

# **JANE AUSTEN**

## **1775–1817**

Although nowadays her portrait adorns coffee mugs and T-shirts, and journalists, making much of the movie adaptations of her novels, like to imagine her as the center of attention at Hollywood parties, Jane Austen spent her short, secluded life away from the spotlight. Other members of her large family—she was one of eight children born to an Anglican clergyman and his wife—appear to have lived more in the world and closer to this turbulent period's great events than she did. Two brothers fought as naval officers in the Napoleonic Wars; another became the banker to the flashy London set of the prince regent; her cousin Eliza, born in India, wed a captain in the French army who perished by the guillotine. Austen, however, spent most of her life in Hampshire, the same rural area of southern England in which she was born. Her formal education was limited to a short time at boarding school. Otherwise she and her beloved sister Cassandra had to scramble, like most girls of their class, into what education they could while at home and amid their father's books. As neither Austen daughter married, home was where these two remained the whole of their adult lives.

Jane Austen turned down a proposal of marriage in 1802, possibly intuiting how difficult it would be to combine authorship with life as a wife, mother, and gentry hostess. She had started writing at the age of twelve, for her family's amusement and her own, and in 1797 began sending work to publishers in London. At

that stage they were for the most part unreceptive. In 1803 one paid £10 for the copyright of the novel we know as *Northanger Abbey*, but then declined to publish it, so that Austen had at last, after tangled negotiations, to buy it back. Finally she published *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) at her own expense, then *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Mansfield Park* (1814). Next—by this time under the prestigious auspices of John Murray, who was also Byron’s publisher—came *Emma* (1816) and, posthumously, after Austen’s death at forty-one, *Persuasion* and a revised version of *Northanger Abbey* (both 1818). The Austen name was never publicly associated with any of these books, whose discreet title pages merely identified “a lady” as the author (though, as was also the case with Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley novels, success made Austen’s authorship an open secret). The modesty of that signature, however, is belied by the assurance of Austen’s narrative voice, the confidence with which (to adapt the famous first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*) it subjects “truths universally acknowledged” to witty critical scrutiny.

The six novels are all, in Austen’s words, “pictures of domestic life in country villages.” The world they depict might seem provincial and insular. For the most part the working classes are absent or present only as silent servants; the soldiers and sailors who were protecting England from Napoleon are presented mainly as welcome additions to a ball. Yet the novels also document with striking detail how, within those country villages, the boundaries that had formerly defined the category of “the gentleman” were becoming permeable under the influence of the changes wrought by revolution and war, and how competition for social status was becoming that much fiercer. Through their heroines, readers can see, as well, how harshly the hard facts of economic life bore down on gentlewomen during this period when a lady’s security depended on her making a good marriage. The conundrum at the center of the fiction is whether such a marriage can be compatible with the independence of mind and moral integrity that Austen, like her heroines, cherishes.

Austen also wrote so as to explore what the novel form could be and do. Along with the reviewers of the time, she criticized the form,



but unlike them, she did so to perfect it. With striking flexibility the new narrative voice that she introduced into novel writing shifts back and forth between a romantic point of view and an irony that reminds us of romance's limits—that reminds us that romance features its own sort of provincialism. At the same time Austen also distanced the novel form from the didactic agenda cultivated by her many contemporaries who were convinced that the only respectable fiction was the antiromance that weaned its readers of their romantic expectations. Her delight in mocking their preachy fictions is not only evident in the parodies that she wrote in the 1790s (including *Love and Friendship*, a forerunner of George Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists") but is a feature of her mature novels, which as a rule conclude in ways that deviate quite flagrantly from the patterns of reward and punishment a moralist might prefer. "I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern," the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* declares in a parting shot, and in characteristic epigrammatic style, "whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience." "[P]ictures of perfection," Austen wrote in a letter, "make me sick and wicked."

Austen's example is so central to what the novel as a form has become that it can be difficult from our present-day vantage point to recognize the iconoclasm in her depictions of the undervalued business of everyday life. It can be hard to see how much her originality—her creation of characters who are both ordinary and unforgettable, her accounts of how they change—challenged her contemporaries' expectations about novels' plots, settings, and characterizations. Her dissent from those expectations is palpable, however, in a "Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters," the satire Austen wrote after *Emma*, and which assembles the various "hints" she had received from well-wishers about what she should write next. The immediate occasion for the "Plan" was the series of letters Austen received from the Reverend James Stanier Clarke, librarian to the prince regent, who having conveyed to her the prince's wish that *Emma* should be dedicated to him,

continued the correspondence so as to suggest topics that Austen should engage for the next novel—in particular, a historical romance about the royal house of Saxe Cobourg. Austen in reply affirmed the comic spirit of all her works: “I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter.”

**Love and Friendship** This work, an anarchic parody written when the author was fourteen, puts front and center Austen's gifts for ironic assassination and her sharp-eyed sense of the preachiness not simply of her period's moralists but more particularly of her period's rebels against orthodox morality. In this miniaturized novel in letters, Austen constructs a world whose inhabitants are absurdly faithful to codes of conduct they extract from their readings of novels in letters. The protagonists of *Love and Friendship* are energetic students of the clichés of fashionable sentimentalism. They adore Nature, like many poets favoring the romantic Scottish Highlands and picturesque Wales; they know that free spirits, true radicals, should elevate the dictates of the heart over the head. The young Austen calls attention to the messages about gender roles embedded in novel writers' celebrations of the strong feelings that make heroines swoon. She shares Wollstonecraft's impatience with how, as the latter put it in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the culture makes women slaves to their emotions—"blown about by every momentary gust of feeling." This work is usually classified among Austen's juvenilia, but it has the worldliness and bravado we expect from a much older author.

Our text modernizes the irregular spelling and, to a lesser extent, the punctuation of the manuscript, which Austen titled "Love and Freindship."

# **Love and Friendship**

*A Novel in a Series of Letters*

## **“Deceived in Friendship & Betrayed in Love”**

### **LETTER THE FIRST *From Isabel to Laura***

How often, in answer to my repeated entreaties that you would give my daughter a regular detail of the misfortunes and adventures of your life, have you said “No, my friend, never will I comply with your request till I may be no longer in danger of again experiencing such dreadful ones.” Surely that time is now at hand. You are this day fifty-five. If a woman may ever be said to be in safety from the determined perseverance of disagreeable lovers and the cruel persecutions of obstinate fathers, surely it must be at such a time of life.

Isabel

### **LETTER THE SECOND *Laura to Isabel***

Although I cannot agree with you in supposing that I shall never again be exposed to misfortunes as unmerited as those I have already experienced, yet to avoid the imputation of obstinacy or ill nature, I will gratify the curiosity of your daughter; and may the fortitude with which I have suffered the many afflictions of my past life prove to her a useful lesson for the support of those which may befall her in her own.

Laura

## LETTER THE THIRD *Laura to Marianne*

As the daughter of my most intimate friend I think you entitled to that knowledge of my unhappy story, which your mother has so often solicited me to give you. My father was a native of Ireland and an inhabitant of Wales; my mother was the natural daughter of a Scotch peer by an Italian opera-girl<sup>1</sup>—I was born in Spain and received my education at a convent in France.

When I had reached my eighteenth year I was recalled by my parents to my paternal roof in Wales. Our mansion was situated in one of the most romantic parts of the vale of Usk.<sup>2</sup> Though my charms are now considerably softened and somewhat impaired by the misfortunes I have undergone, I was once beautiful. But lovely as I was, the graces of my person were the least of my perfections. Of every accomplishment<sup>3</sup> accustomary to my sex, I was mistress. When in the convent, my progress had always exceeded my instructions, my acquirements had been wonderful for my age, and I had shortly surpassed my masters.

In my mind, every virtue that could adorn it was centered; it was the rendezvous of every good quality and of every noble sentiment.

A sensibility<sup>4</sup> too tremblingly alive to every affliction of my friends, my acquaintance, and particularly to every affliction of my own, was my only fault, if a fault it could be called. Alas! how altered now! Though indeed my own misfortunes do not make less impression on me than they ever did, yet now I never feel for those of an other. My accomplishments too, begin to fade—I can neither sing so well nor dance so gracefully as I once did—and I have entirely forgot the *Minuet Dela Cour*.<sup>5</sup>

Adieu.

Laura

## LETTER THE FOURTH *Laura to Marianne*

Our neighbourhood was small, for it consisted only of your mother. She may probably have already told you that, being left by her parents in indigent circumstances, she had retired into Wales on economical motives. There it was our friendship first commenced. Isabel was then one and twenty—Though pleasing both in her person and manners (between ourselves) she never possessed the hundredth part of my beauty or accomplishments. Isabel had seen the world. She had passed two years at one of the first boarding schools in London, had spent a fortnight in Bath,<sup>6</sup> and had supped one night in Southampton.<sup>7</sup>

“Beware, my Laura, (she would often say) beware of the insipid vanities and idle dissipations of the metropolis of England; beware of the unmeaning luxuries of Bath and of the stinking fish of Southampton.”

“Alas! (exclaimed I) how am I to avoid those evils I shall never be exposed to? What probability is there of my ever tasting the dissipations of London, the luxuries of Bath, or the stinking fish of Southampton? I who am doomed to waste my days of youth and beauty in an humble cottage in the vale of Usk.”

Ah! little did I then think I was ordained so soon to quit that humble cottage for the deceitful pleasures of the world.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE FIFTH *Laura to Marianne***

One evening in December as my father, my mother, and myself were arranged in social converse round our fireside, we were on a sudden greatly astonished by hearing a violent knocking on the outward door of our rustic cot.<sup>8</sup>

My father started—“What noise is that?” (said he.) “It sounds like a loud rapping at the door”—(replied my mother.) “It does indeed.” (cried I.) “I am of your opinion; (said my father) it certainly does appear to proceed from some uncommon violence exerted against

our unoffending door." "Yes, (exclaimed I) I cannot help thinking it must be somebody who knocks for admittance."

"That is another point (replied he;) We must not pretend to determine on what motive the person may knock—though that someone *does* rap at the door, I am partly convinced."

Here, a second tremendous rap interrupted my father in his speech and somewhat alarmed my mother and me.

"Had we not better go and see who it is? (said she) The servants are out." "I think we had." (replied I.) "Certainly, (added my father) by all means." "Shall we go now?" (said my mother.) "The sooner the better." (answered he). "Oh! let no time be lost." (cried I.)

A third more violent rap than ever again assaulted our ears. "I am certain there is somebody knocking at the door." (said my mother.) "I think there must," (replied my father) "I fancy the servants are returned; (said I) I think I hear Mary going to the door." "I'm glad of it (cried my father) for I long to know who it is."

I was right in my conjecture; for Mary instantly entering the room informed us that a young gentleman and his servant were at the door, who had lost their way, were very cold, and begged leave to warm themselves by our fire.

"Won't you admit them?" (said I) "You have no objection, my dear?" (said my Father.) "None in the world." (replied my mother.)

Mary, without waiting for any further commands, immediately left the room and quickly returned, introducing the most beauteous and amiable youth I had ever beheld. The servant, she kept to herself.

My natural sensibility had already been greatly affected by the sufferings of the unfortunate stranger, and no sooner did I first behold him, than I felt that on him the happiness or misery of my future life must depend.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE SIXTH *Laura to Marianne***

The noble youth informed us that his name was Lindsay—for particular reasons, however, I shall conceal it under that of Talbot. He told us that he was the son of an English baronet,<sup>9</sup> that his mother had been many years no more, and that he had a sister of the middle size. "My father (he continued) is a mean and mercenary wretch—it is only to such particular friends as this dear party that I would thus betray his failings. Your virtues, my amiable Polydore (addressing himself to my father), yours, dear Claudia, and yours, my charming Laura, call on me to repose in you my confidence." We bowed. "My Father, seduced by the false glare of fortune and the deluding pomp of title, insisted on my giving my hand to Lady Dorothea. No, never, exclaimed I. Lady Dorothea is lovely and engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but, know sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your wishes. No! Never shall it be said that I obliged my father."

We all admired the noble manliness of his reply. He continued.

"Sir Edward was surprised; he had perhaps little expected to meet with so spirited an opposition to his will. 'Where, Edward, in the name of wonder (said he) did you pick up this unmeaning gibberish? You have been studying novels, I suspect.' I scorned to answer: it would have been beneath my dignity. I mounted my horse and, followed by my faithful William, set forwards for my aunt's."

"My father's house is situated in Bedfordshire, my aunt's in Middlesex, and, though I flatter myself with being a tolerable proficient in geography, I know not how it happened, but I found myself entering this beautiful vale, which I find is in South Wales, when I had expected to have reached my aunt's."<sup>1</sup>

"After having wandered some time on the banks of the Usk without knowing which way to go, I began to lament my cruel destiny in the bitterest and most pathetic manner. It was now perfectly dark, not a single star was there to direct my steps, and I know not what might have befallen me, had I not at length discerned through the solemn gloom that surrounded me a distant light, which, as I approached it, I discovered to be the cheerful blaze of your fire. Impelled by the combination of misfortunes under which



I laboured, namely fear, cold, and hunger, I hesitated not to ask admittance, which at length I have gained; and now, my adorable Laura (continued he, taking my hand), when may I hope to receive that reward of all the painful sufferings I have undergone during the course of my attachment to you, to which I have ever aspired? Oh! when will you reward me with yourself?"

"This instant, dear and amiable Edward." (replied I.) We were immediately united by my father, who though he had never taken orders had been bred to the church.<sup>2</sup>

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE SEVENTH *Laura to Marianne***

We remained but a few days after our marriage in the vale of Usk. After taking an affecting farewell of my father, my mother, and my Isabel, I accompanied Edward to his aunt's in Middlesex. Philippa received us both with every expression of affectionate love. My arrival was indeed a most agreeable surprise to her, as she had not only been totally ignorant of my marriage with her nephew, but had never even had the slightest idea of there being such a person in the world.

Augusta, the sister of Edward, was on a visit to her when we arrived. I found her exactly what her brother had described her to be—of the middle size. She received me with equal surprise, though not with equal cordiality, as Philippa. There was a disagreeable coldness and forbidding reserve in her reception of me which was equally distressing and unexpected. None of that interesting sensibility or amiable sympathy in her manners and address to me which should have distinguished our introduction to each other. Her language was neither warm, nor affectionate, her expressions of regard were neither animated nor cordial; her arms were not opened to receive me to her heart, though my own were extended to press her to mine.

A short conversation between Augusta and her brother, which I accidentally overheard, increased my dislike to her, and convinced me that her heart was no more formed for the soft ties of love than for the endearing intercourse of friendship.

"But do you think that my father will ever be reconciled to this imprudent connection?" (said Augusta.)

"Augusta (replied the noble youth) I thought you had a better opinion of me, than to imagine I would so abjectly degrade myself as to consider my father's concurrence in any of my affairs, either of consequence or concern to me. Tell me, Augusta, tell me with sincerity; did you ever know me consult his inclinations or follow his advice in the least trifling particular since the age of fifteen?"

"Edward (replied she) you are surely too diffident in your own praise. Since you were fifteen only!—My dear brother, since you were five years old, I entirely acquit you of ever having willingly contributed to the satisfaction of your father. But still I am not without apprehensions of your being shortly obliged to degrade yourself in your own eyes by seeking a support for your wife in the generosity of Sir Edward."

"Never, never, Augusta, will I so demean myself. (said Edward). Support! What support will Laura want which she can receive from him?"

"Only those very insignificant ones of victuals and drink." (answered she.)

"Victuals and drink! (replied my husband in a most nobly contemptuous manner) and dost thou then imagine that there is no other support for an exalted mind (such as is my Laura's) than the mean and indelicate employment of eating and drinking?"

"None that I know of so efficacious." (returned Augusta).

"And did you then never feel the pleasing pangs of love, Augusta? (replied my Edward). Does it appear impossible to your vile and corrupted palate to exist on love? Can you not conceive the luxury of living in every distress that poverty can inflict, with the object of your tenderest affection?"

"You are too ridiculous (said Augusta) to argue with; perhaps, however, you may in time be convinced that. . . ."

Here I was prevented from hearing the remainder of her speech, by the appearance of a very handsome young woman, who was ushered into the room at the door of which I had been listening. On hearing her announced by the name of "Lady Dorothea," I instantly quitted my post and followed her into the parlour, for I well remembered that she was the lady proposed as a wife for my Edward by the cruel and unrelenting baronet.

Although Lady Dorothea's visit was nominally to Philippa and Augusta, yet I have some reason to imagine that (acquainted with the marriage and arrival of Edward) to see me was a principal motive to it.

I soon perceived that, though lovely and elegant in her person and though easy and polite in her address, she was of that inferior order of beings with regard to delicate feeling, tender sentiments, and refined sensibility, of which Augusta was one.

She stayed but half an hour and neither, in the course of her visit, confided to me any of her secret thoughts, nor requested me to confide in her any of mine. You will easily imagine therefore, my dear Marianne, that I could not feel any ardent affection or very sincere attachment for Lady Dorothea.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE EIGHTH *Laura to Marianne, in continuation***

Lady Dorothea had not left us long before another visitor, as unexpected a one as her Ladyship, was announced. It was Sir Edward, who, informed by Augusta of her brother's marriage, came doubtless to reproach him for having dared to unite himself to me without his knowledge. But Edward, foreseeing his design,

approached him with heroic fortitude as soon as he entered the room, and addressed him in the following manner.

"Sir Edward, I know the motive of your journey here—You come with the base design of reproaching me for having entered into an indissoluble engagement with my Laura without your consent—But, Sir, I glory in the act—. It is my greatest boast that I have incurred the displeasure of my father!"

So saying, he took my hand and, whilst Sir Edward, Philippa, and Augusta were doubtless reflecting with admiration on his undaunted bravery, led me from the parlour to his father's carriage, which yet remained at the door and in which we were instantly conveyed from the pursuit of Sir Edward.

The postilions<sup>3</sup> had at first received orders only to take the London road; as soon as we had sufficiently reflected, however, we ordered them to drive to M—., the seat of Edward's most particular friend, which was but a few miles distant.

At M—. we arrived in a few hours; and on sending in our names were immediately admitted to Sophia, the wife of Edward's friend. After having been deprived during the course of three weeks of a real friend (for such I term your mother), imagine my transports at beholding one, most truly worthy of the name. Sophia was rather above the middle size; most elegantly formed. A soft languor spread over her lovely features, but increased their beauty.—It was the characteristic of her mind—. She was all sensibility and feeling. We flew into each other's arms and, after having exchanged vows of mutual friendship for the rest of our lives, instantly unfolded to each other the most inward secrets of our hearts—. We were interrupted in this delightful employment by the entrance of Augustus (Edward's friend), who was just returned from a solitary ramble.

Never did I see such an affecting scene as was the meeting of Edward and Augustus.

"My life! my soul!" (exclaimed the former) "My adorable angel!" (replied the latter) as they flew into each other's arms. It was too pathetic for the feelings of Sophia and myself—We fainted alternately on a sofa.<sup>4</sup>

Adieu.  
Laura

## **LETTER THE NINTH *From the same to the same***

Towards the close of the day we received the following letter from Philippa.

Sir Edward is greatly incensed by your abrupt departure; he has taken back Augusta with him to Bedfordshire. Much as I wish to enjoy again your charming society, I cannot determine to snatch you from that of such dear and deserving friends—When your visit to them is terminated, I trust you will return to the arms of your  
Philippa

We returned a suitable answer to this affectionate note and, after thanking her for her kind invitation, assured her that we would certainly avail ourselves of it, whenever we might have no other place to go to. Though certainly nothing could, to any reasonable being, have appeared more satisfactory than so grateful a reply to her invitation, yet I know not how it was, but she was certainly capricious enough to be displeased with our behaviour and in a few weeks after, either to revenge our conduct, or relieve her own solitude, married a young and illiterate fortune-hunter. This imprudent step (though we were sensible<sup>5</sup> that it would probably deprive us of that fortune which Philippa had ever taught us to expect) could not on our own accounts excite from our exalted minds a single sigh; yet fearful lest it might prove a source of endless misery to the deluded bride, our trembling sensibility was greatly affected when we were first informed of the event. The affectionate entreaties of Augustus and Sophia that we would for ever consider their house as our home, easily prevailed on us to determine never more to leave them—. In the society of my Edward and this amiable pair, I passed the happiest moments of my life: Our

time was most delightfully spent, in mutual protestations of friendship, and in vows of unalterable love, in which we were secure from being interrupted by intruding and disagreeable visitors, as Augustus and Sophia had, on their first entrance in the neighbourhood, taken due care to inform the surrounding families that, as their happiness centered wholly in themselves, they wished for no other society. But alas! my dear Marianne, such happiness as I then enjoyed was too perfect to be lasting. A most severe and unexpected blow at once destroyed every sensation of pleasure. Convinced as you must be from what I have already told you concerning Augustus and Sophia, that there never were a happier couple, I need not, I imagine, inform you that their union had been contrary to the inclinations of their cruel and mercenary parents, who had vainly endeavoured with obstinate perseverance to force them into a marriage with those whom they had ever abhorred, but, with an heroic fortitude worthy to be related and admired, they had both constantly refused to submit to such despotic power.

After having so nobly disentangled themselves from the shackles of parental authority by a clandestine marriage, they were determined never to forfeit the good opinion they had gained in the world in so doing, by accepting any proposals of reconciliation that might be offered them by their fathers—to this farther trial of their noble independence, however, they never were exposed.

They had been married but a few months when our visit to them commenced, during which time they had been amply supported by a considerable sum of money which Augustus had gracefully purloined from his unworthy father's escritoire,<sup>6</sup> a few days before his union with Sophia.

By our arrival their expenses were considerably increased, though their means for supplying them were then nearly exhausted. But they, exalted creatures! scorned to reflect a moment on their pecuniary distresses and would have blushed at the idea of paying their debts.—Alas! what was their reward for such disinterested behaviour? The beautiful Augustus was arrested and we were all undone. Such perfidious treachery in the merciless perpetrators of

the deed will shock your gentle nature, dearest Marianne, as much as it then affected the delicate sensibility of Edward, Sophia, your Laura, and of Augustus himself. To complete such unparalleled barbarity, we were informed that an execution in the house would shortly take place.<sup>7</sup> Ah! what could we do but what we did! We sighed and fainted on the sofa.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE TENTH *Laura in continuation***

When we were somewhat recovered from the overpowering effusions of our grief, Edward desired that we would consider what was the most prudent step to be taken in our unhappy situation, while he repaired to his imprisoned friend to lament over his misfortunes. We promised that we would, and he set forwards on his journey to town. During his absence we faithfully complied with his desire and, after the most mature deliberation, at length agreed that the best thing we could do was to leave the house of which we every moment expected the officers of justice to take possession. We waited therefore with the greatest impatience for the return of Edward, in order to impart to him the result of our deliberations—. But no Edward appeared—. In vain did we count the tedious moments of his absence—in vain did we weep—in vain even did we sigh—no Edward returned—. This was too cruel, too unexpected a blow to our gentle sensibility—we could not support it—we could only faint—. At length, collecting all the resolution I was mistress of, I arose and, after packing up some necessary apparel for Sophia and myself, I dragged her to a carriage I had ordered, and instantly we set out for London. As the habitation of Augustus was within twelve miles of town, it was not long ere we arrived there, and no sooner had we entered Holborn<sup>8</sup> than, letting down one of the front glasses,<sup>9</sup> I enquired of every decent-looking person that we passed “If they had seen my Edward?”

But as we drove too rapidly to allow them to answer my repeated enquiries, I gained little, or indeed, no information concerning him. "Where am I to drive?" said the postilion. "To Newgate,<sup>1</sup> gentle youth (replied I), to see Augustus." "Oh! no, no, (exclaimed Sophia) I cannot go to Newgate; I shall not be able to support the sight of my Augustus in so cruel a confinement—my feelings are sufficiently shocked by the *recital* of his distress, but to behold it will overpower my sensibility." As I perfectly agreed with her in the justice of her sentiments, the postilion was instantly directed to return into the country. You may perhaps have been somewhat surprised, my dearest Marianne, that in the distress I then endured, destitute of any support, and unprovided with any habitation, I should never once have remembered my father and mother or my paternal cottage in the vale of Usk. To account for this seeming forgetfulness I must inform you of a trifling circumstance concerning them which I have as yet never mentioned—. The death of my parents a few weeks after my departure is the circumstance I allude to. By their decease I became the lawful inheritress of their house and fortune. But alas! the house had never been their own, and their fortune had only been an annuity<sup>2</sup> on their own lives. Such is the depravity of the world! To your mother I should have returned with pleasure, should have been happy to have introduced to her my charming Sophia, and should have with cheerfulness have passed the remainder of my life in their dear society in the vale of Usk, had not one obstacle to the execution of so agreeable a scheme intervened; which was the marriage and removal of your mother to a distant part of Ireland.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE ELEVENTH *Laura in continuation***

"I have a relation in Scotland (said Sophia to me as we left London) who, I am certain, would not hesitate in receiving me." "Shall I order the boy to drive there?" said I—but instantly recollecting myself, exclaimed "Alas, I fear it will be too long a journey for the horses."



Unwilling however to act only from my own inadequate knowledge of the strength and abilities of horses, I consulted the postilion, who was entirely of my opinion concerning the affair. We therefore determined to change horses at the next town and to travel post<sup>3</sup> the remainder of the journey—. When we arrived at the last inn we were to stop at, which was but a few miles from the house of Sophia's relation, unwilling to intrude our society on him unexpected and unthought of, we wrote a very elegant and well-penned note to him containing an account of our destitute and melancholy situation, and of our intention to spend some months with him in Scotland. As soon as we had dispatched this letter, we immediately prepared to follow it in person and were stepping into the carriage for that purpose, when our attention was attracted by the entrance of a coroneted coach and four<sup>4</sup> into the inn-yard. A gentleman considerably advanced in years descended from it—. At his first appearance my sensibility was wonderfully affected and ere I had gazed at him a second time, an instinctive sympathy whispered to my heart, that he was my grandfather.

Convinced that I could not be mistaken in my conjecture, I instantly sprang from the carriage I had just entered, and following the venerable stranger into the room he had been shewn to, I threw myself on my knees before him and besought him to acknowledge me as his grandchild.—He started, and, after having attentively examined my features, raised me from the ground and throwing his grandfatherly arms around my neck, exclaimed, "Acknowledge thee! Yes, dear resemblance of my Laurina and my Laurina's daughter, sweet image of my Claudia and my Claudia's mother, I do acknowledge thee as the daughter of the one and the granddaughter of the other." While he was thus tenderly embracing me, Sophia, astonished at my precipitate departure, entered the room in search of me—. No sooner had she caught the eye of the venerable peer, than he exclaimed with every mark of astonishment—"Another granddaughter ! Yes, yes, I see you are the daughter of my Laurina's eldest girl; your resemblance to the beauteous Matilda sufficiently proclaims it." "Oh!" replied Sophia, "when I first beheld

you the instinct of nature whispered me that we were in some degree related—But whether grandfathers, or grandmothers, I could not pretend to determine.” He folded her in his arms, and whilst they were tenderly embracing, the door of the apartment opened and a most beautiful young man appeared. On perceiving him Lord St. Clair started and, retreating back a few paces, with uplifted hands, said, “Another grandchild! What an unexpected happiness is this! to discover in the space of three minutes, as many of my descendants! This, I am certain, is Philander, the son of my Laurina’s third girl, the amiable Bertha; there wants now but the presence of Gustavus to complete the union of my Laurina’s grandchildren.”

“And here he is; (said a graceful youth who that instant entered the room) here is the Gustavus you desire to see. I am the son of Agatha, your Laurina’s fourth and youngest daughter.” “I see you are indeed; replied Lord St. Clair—But tell me (continued he, looking fearfully towards the door) tell me, have I any other grandchildren in the house.” “None, my Lord.” “Then I will provide for you all without further delay—Here are four banknotes of 50£ each—Take them and remember I have done the duty of a grandfather—.” He instantly left the room and immediately afterwards the house.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE TWELFTH *Laura in continuation***

You may imagine how greatly we were surprised by the sudden departure of Lord St. Clair. “Ignoble grandsire!” exclaimed Sophia. “Unworthy grandfather!” said I, and instantly fainted in each other’s arms. How long we remained in this situation I know not; but when we recovered we found ourselves alone, without either Gustavus, Philander, or the banknotes. As we were deploring our unhappy fate, the door of the apartment opened and “Macdonald” was announced. He was Sophia’s cousin. The haste with which he came to our relief so soon after the receipt of our note spoke so greatly in his favour that I hesitated not to pronounce him, at first sight, a tender and

sympathetic friend. Alas! he little deserved the name—for though he told us that he was much concerned at our misfortunes, yet by his own account it appeared that the perusal of them had neither drawn from him a single sigh, nor induced him to bestow one curse on our vindictive stars—. He told Sophia that his daughter depended on her returning with him to Macdonald Hall, and that as his cousin's friend he should be happy to see me there also. To Macdonald Hall, therefore, we went, and were received with great kindness by Janetta, the daughter of Macdonald, and the mistress of the mansion. Janetta was then only fifteen; naturally well disposed, endowed with a susceptible heart, and a sympathetic disposition, she might, had these amiable qualities been properly encouraged, have been an ornament to human nature; but, unfortunately, her father possessed not a soul sufficiently exalted to admire so promising a disposition, and had endeavoured by every means in his power to prevent its increasing with her years. He had actually so far extinguished the natural noble sensibility of her heart, as to prevail on her to accept an offer from a young man of his recommendation. They were to be married in a few months, and Graham was in the house when we arrived. *We* soon saw through his character—. He was just such a man as one might have expected to be the choice of Macdonald. They said he was sensible, well-informed, and agreeable; we did not pretend to judge of such trifles, but, as we were convinced he had no soul, that he had never read the *Sorrows of Werter*,<sup>5</sup> and that his hair bore not the slightest resemblance to auburn, we were certain that Janetta could feel no affection for him, or at least that she ought to feel none. The very circumstance of his being her father's choice, too, was so much in his disfavour, that had he been deserving her in every other respect, yet *that* of itself ought to have been a sufficient reason in the eyes of Janetta for rejecting him. These considerations we were determined to represent to her in their proper light and doubted not of meeting with the desired success from one naturally so well disposed, whose errors in the affair had only arisen from a want of proper confidence in her own opinion, and a suitable contempt of her father's. We found her,

indeed, all that our warmest wishes could have hoped for; we had no difficulty to convince her that it was impossible she could love Graham, or that it was her duty to disobey her father; the only thing at which she rather seemed to hesitate was our assertion that she must be attached to some other person. For some time, she persevered in declaring that she knew no other young man for whom she had the smallest affection; but upon explaining the impossibility of such a thing she said that she believed she *did like* Captain M'Kenzie better than anyone she knew besides. This confession satisfied us and, after having enumerated the good qualities of M'Kenzie and assured her that she was violently in love with him, we desired to know whether he had ever in anywise declared his affection to her.

"So far from having ever declared it, I have no reason to imagine that he has ever felt any for me." said Janetta. "That he certainly adores you (replied Sophia) there can be no doubt—. The attachment must be reciprocal—. Did he never gaze on you with admiration—tenderly press your hand—drop an involuntary tear—and leave the room abruptly?" "Never (replied she) that I remember—he has always left the room indeed when his visit has been ended, but has never gone away particularly abruptly or without making a bow." "Indeed, my love (said I) you must be mistaken—: for it is absolutely impossible that he should ever have left you but with confusion, despair, and precipitation—. Consider but for a moment, Janetta, and you must be convinced how absurd it is to suppose that he could ever make a bow, or behave like any other person." Having settled this point to our satisfaction, the next we took into consideration was to determine in what manner we should inform M'Kenzie of the favourable opinion Janetta entertained of him—. We at length agreed to acquaint him with it by an anonymous letter which Sophia drew up in the following manner.

Oh! happy lover of the beautiful Janetta; oh! enviable possessor of *her* heart whose hand is destined to another, why do you thus delay a confession of your attachment to the amiable object of it ? Oh! consider that a few weeks will at once

put an end to every flattering hope that you may now entertain, by uniting the unfortunate victim of her father's cruelty to the execrable and detested Graham.

Alas! why do you thus so cruelly connive at the projected misery of her and of yourself by delaying to communicate that scheme which had doubtless long possessed your imagination? A secret union will at once secure the felicity of both.

The amiable M'Kenzie, whose modesty, as he afterwards assured us, had been the only reason of his having so long concealed the violence of his affection for Janetta, on receiving this billet flew on the wings of love to Macdonald Hall and so powerfully pleaded his attachment to her who inspired it that, after a few more private interviews, Sophia and I experienced the satisfaction of seeing them depart for Gretna Green,<sup>6</sup> which they chose for the celebration of their nuptials, in preference to any other place, although it was at a considerable distance from Macdonald Hall.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE THIRTEENTH *Laura in Continuation***

They had been gone nearly a couple of hours, before either Macdonald or Graham had entertained any suspicion of the affair—. And they might not even then have suspected it, but for the following little accident. Sophia, happening one day to open a private drawer in Macdonald's library with one of her own keys, discovered that it was the place where he kept his papers of consequence and amongst them some banknotes of considerable amount. This discovery she imparted to me; and having agreed together that it would be a proper treatment of so vile a wretch as Macdonald to deprive him of money, perhaps dishonestly gained, it was determined that the next time we should either of us happen to go that way, we would take one or more of the banknotes from the drawer. This well-meant plan we had often successfully put in

execution; but alas! on the very day of Janetta's escape, as Sophia was majestically removing the fifth banknote from the drawer to her own purse, she was suddenly most impertinently interrupted in her employment by the entrance of Macdonald himself, in a most abrupt and precipitate manner. Sophia (who, though naturally all winning sweetness, could when occasions demanded it call forth the dignity of her sex) instantly put on a most forbidding look, and, darting an angry frown on the undaunted culprit, demanded in a haughty tone of voice "Wherefore her retirement was thus insolently broken in on?" The unblushing Macdonald, without even endeavouring to exculpate himself from the crime he was charged with, meanly endeavoured to reproach Sophia with ignobly defrauding him of his money. The dignity of Sophia was wounded; "Wretch (exclaimed she, hastily replacing the banknote in the drawer) how darest thou to accuse me of an act, of which the bare idea makes me blush?" The base wretch was still unconvinced and continued to upbraid the justly offended Sophia in such opprobrious language, that at length he so greatly provoked the gentle sweetness of her nature, as to induce her to revenge herself on him by informing him of Janetta's elopement, and of the active part we had both taken in the affair. At this period of their quarrel I entered the library and was, as you may imagine, equally offended as Sophia at the ill-grounded accusations of the malevolent and contemptible Macdonald. "Base miscreant (cried I) how canst thou thus undauntedly endeavour to sully the spotless reputation of such bright excellence? Why dost thou not suspect *my* innocence as soon?" "Be satisfied Madam (replied he) I *do* suspect it, and therefore must desire that you will both leave this house in less than half an hour."

"We shall go willingly; (answered Sophia) our hearts have long detested thee, and nothing but our friendship for thy daughter could have induced us to remain so long beneath thy roof."

"Your friendship for my daughter has indeed been most powerfully exerted by throwing her into the arms of an unprincipled fortune-hunter." (replied he.)

"Yes, (exclaimed I) amidst every misfortune, it will afford us some consolation to reflect that by this one act of friendship to Janetta, we have amply discharged every obligation that we have received from her father."

"It must indeed be a most grateful reflection, to your exalted minds." (said he.)

As soon as we had packed up our wardrobe and valuables, we left Macdonald Hall, and after having walked about a mile and a half we sat down by the side of a clear limpid stream to refresh our exhausted limbs. The place was suited to meditation—. A grove of full-grown elms sheltered us from the east—. A bed of full-grown nettles from the west—. Before us ran the murmuring brook and behind us ran the turnpike road. We were in a mood for contemplation and in a disposition to enjoy so beautiful a spot. A mutual silence, which had for some time reigned between us, was at length broke by my exclaiming—"What a lovely scene! Alas, why are not Edward and Augustus here to enjoy its beauties with us?"

"Ah! my beloved Laura (cried Sophia) for pity's sake, forbear recalling to my remembrance the unhappy situation of my imprisoned husband. Alas, what would I not give to learn the fate of my Augustus! to know if he is still in Newgate, or if he is yet hung. But never shall I be able so far to conquer my tender sensibility as to enquire after him. Oh! do not, I beseech you, ever let me again hear you repeat his beloved name—. It affects me too deeply—. I cannot bear to hear him mentioned; it wounds my feelings."

"Excuse me, my Sophia, for having thus unwillingly offended you —" replied I—and then changing the conversation, desired her to admire the noble grandeur of the elms which sheltered us from the eastern zephyr.<sup>7</sup> "Alas! my Laura (returned she) avoid so melancholy a subject, I entreat you.—Do not again wound my sensibility by observations on those elms. They remind me of Augustus—. He was like them, tall, majestic—he possessed that noble grandeur which you admire in them."

I was silent, fearful lest I might any more unwillingly distress her by fixing on any other subject of conversation which might again

remind her of Augustus.

"Why do you not speak, my Laura?" (said she, after a short pause) "I cannot support this silence—you must not leave me to my own reflections; they ever recur to Augustus."

"What a beautiful sky! (said I) How charmingly is the azure varied by those delicate streaks of white!"

"Oh! my Laura (replied she, hastily withdrawing her eyes from a momentary glance at the sky) do not thus distress me by calling my attention to an object which so cruelly reminds me of my Augustus's blue satin waistcoat striped with white! In pity to your unhappy friend, avoid a subject so distressing." What could I do? The feelings of Sophia were at that time so exquisite, and the tenderness she felt for Augustus so poignant, that I had not the power to start any other topic, justly fearing that it might in some unforeseen manner again awaken all her sensibility by directing her thoughts to her husband.—Yet to be silent would be cruel; she had entreated me to talk.

From this dilemma I was most fortunately relieved by an accident truly apropos;<sup>8</sup> it was the lucky overturning of a gentleman's phaeton,<sup>9</sup> on the road which ran murmuring behind us. It was a most fortunate accident as it diverted the attention of Sophia from the melancholy reflections which she had been before indulging. We instantly quitted our seats and ran to the rescue of those who but a few moments before had been in so elevated a situation as a fashionably high phaeton, but who were now laid low and sprawling in the dust—. "What an ample subject for reflection on the uncertain enjoyments of this world, would not that phaeton and the life of Cardinal Wolsey afford a thinking mind!"<sup>1</sup> said I to Sophia as we were hastening to the field of action.

She had not time to answer me, for every thought was now engaged by the horrid spectacle before us. Two gentlemen, most elegantly attired but weltering in their blood, was what first struck our eyes—we approached—they were Edward and Augustus—Yes, dearest Marianne, they were our husbands. Sophia shrieked and fainted on the ground—I screamed and instantly ran mad—. We



remained thus mutually deprived of our senses some minutes, and on regaining them were deprived of them again.—For an hour and a quarter did we continue in this unfortunate situation—Sophia fainting every moment and I running mad as often. At length a groan from the hapless Edward (who alone retained any share of life) restored us to ourselves—. Had we indeed before imagined that either of them lived, we should have been more sparing of our grief—but as we had supposed when we first beheld them that they were no more, we knew that nothing could remain to be done but what we were about—. No sooner therefore did we hear my Edward's groan than, postponing our lamentations for the present, we hastily ran to the dear youth and kneeling on each side of him implored him not to die—. "Laura (said he, fixing his now languid eyes on me) I fear I have been overturned."

I was overjoyed to find him yet sensible—.

"Oh! tell me, Edward (said I) tell me, I beseech you, before you die, what has befallen you since, that unhappy day in which Augustus was arrested and we were separated—"

"I will" (said he) and instantly fetching a deep sigh, expired—. Sophia immediately sunk again into a swoon—. *My* grief was more audible. My voice faltered, my eyes assumed a vacant stare, my face became as pale as death, and my senses were considerably impaired —.

"Talk not to me of phaetons (said I, raving in a frantic, incoherent manner)—give me a violin—. I'll play to him and soothe him in his melancholy hours—Beware, ye gentle nymphs, of Cupid's thunderbolts, avoid the piercing shafts of Jupiter—Look at that grove of firs—I see a leg of mutton—They told me Edward was not dead; but they deceived me—they took him for a cucumber—" Thus I continued, wildly exclaiming on my Edward's death—. For two hours did I rave thus madly and should not then have left off, as I was not in the least fatigued, had not Sophia, who was just recovered from her swoon, entreated me to consider that night was now approaching and that the damps began to fall. "And whither shall we go (said I) to shelter us from either?" "To that white cottage."

(replied she, pointing to a neat building which rose up amidst the grove of elms and which I had not before observed—) I agreed, and we instantly walked to it—we knocked at the door—it was opened by an old woman; on being requested to afford us a night's lodging, she informed us that her house was but small, that she had only two bedrooms, but that however, we should be welcome to one of them. We were satisfied and followed the good woman into the house, where we were greatly cheered by the sight of a comfortable fire—. She was a widow and had only one daughter, who was then just seventeen—One of the best of ages; but alas! she was very plain and her name was Bridget. . . . . Nothing therefore could be expected from her—she could not be supposed to possess either exalted ideas, delicate feelings, or refined sensibilities—She was nothing more than a mere good-tempered, civil, and obliging young woman; as such we could scarcely dislike her—she was only an object of contempt—.

Adieu.

Laura

## **LETTER THE FOURTEENTH *Laura in continuation***

Arm yourself, my amiable young friend, with all the philosophy you are mistress of; summon up all the fortitude you possess, for alas! in the perusal of the following pages your sensibility will be most severely tried. Ah! what were the misfortunes I had before experienced and which I have already related to you, to the one I am now going to inform you of. The death of my father, my mother, and my husband, though almost more than my gentle nature could support, were trifles in comparison to the misfortune I am now proceeding to relate. The morning after our arrival at the cottage, Sophia complained of a violent pain in her delicate limbs, accompanied with a disagreeable headache. She attributed it to a cold caught by her continued faintings in the open air as the dew was falling the evening before. This, I feared, was but too probably the case; since how could it be otherwise accounted for that I should

have escaped the same indisposition, but by supposing that the bodily exertions I had undergone in my repeated fits of frenzy had so effectually circulated and warmed my blood as to make me proof against the chilling damps of night, whereas Sophia, lying totally inactive on the ground, must have been exposed to all their severity. I was most seriously alarmed by her illness, which, trifling as it may appear to you, a certain instinctive sensibility whispered me would in the end be fatal to her.

Alas! my fears were but too fully justified; she grew gradually worse, and I daily became more alarmed for her.—At length she was obliged to confine herself solely to the bed allotted us by our worthy landlady—. Her disorder turned to a galloping consumption<sup>2</sup> and in a few days carried her off. Amidst all my lamentations for her (and violent you may suppose they were) I yet received some consolation in the reflection of my having paid every attention to her that could be offered in her illness. I had wept over her every day—had bathed her sweet face with my tears and had pressed her fair hands continually in mine—. “My beloved Laura (said she to me, a few hours before she died) take warning from my unhappy end and avoid the imprudent conduct which has occasioned it . . . beware of fainting-fits . . . Though at the time they may be refreshing and agreeable, yet, believe me, they will in the end, if too often repeated and at improper seasons, prove destructive to your constitution. . . . My fate will teach you this . . . I die a martyr to my grief for the loss of Augustus. . . . One fatal swoon has cost me my life. . . . Beware of swoons, dear Laura . . . A frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious; it is an exercise to the body and, if not too violent, is, I dare say, conducive to health in its consequences—Run mad as often as you choose; but do not faint—.”

These were the last words she ever addressed to me . . . It was her dying advice to her afflicted Laura, who has ever most faithfully adhered to it.

After having attended my lamented friend to her early grave, I immediately (though late at night) left the detested village in which she died, and near which had expired my husband and Augustus. I

had not walked many yards from it before I was overtaken by a stagecoach, in which I instantly took a place, determined to proceed in it to Edinburgh, where I hoped to find some kind pitying friend who would receive and comfort me in my afflictions.

It was so dark when I entered the coach that I could not distinguish the number of my fellow travellers; I could only perceive that they were many. Regardless, however, of any thing concerning them, I gave myself up to my own sad reflections. A general silence prevailed—a silence, which was by nothing interrupted but by the loud and repeated snores of one of the party.

“What an illiterate villain must that man be! (thought I to myself) What a total want of delicate refinement must he have who can thus shock our senses by such a brutal noise! He must, I am certain, be capable of every bad action! There is no crime too black for such a character!” Thus reasoned I within myself, and doubtless such were the reflections of my fellow travellers.

At length, returning day enabled me to behold the unprincipled scoundrel who had so violently disturbed my feelings. It was Sir Edward, the father of my deceased husband. By his side sat Augusta, and on the same seat with me were your mother and Lady Dorothea. Imagine my surprise at finding myself thus seated amongst my old acquaintance. Great as was my astonishment, it was yet increased, when, on look[ing] out of [the] windows, I beheld the husband of Philippa, with Philippa by his side, on the coach-box,<sup>3</sup> and when, on looking behind, I beheld Philander and Gustavus in the basket.<sup>4</sup> “Oh! heavens, (exclaimed I) is it possible that I should so unexpectedly be surrounded by my nearest relations and connections?” These words roused the rest of the party, and every eye was directed to the corner in which I sat; “Oh! my Isabel (continued I, throwing myself across Lady Dorothea into her arms) receive once more to your bosom the unfortunate Laura. Alas! when we last parted in the vale of Usk, I was happy in being united to the best of Edwards; I had then a father and a mother, and had never known misfortunes—But now deprived of every friend but you—”.

“What! (interrupted Augusta) is my brother dead then? Tell us, I entreat you, what is become of him?” “Yes, cold and insensible<sup>5</sup> nymph, (replied I) that luckless swain, your brother, is no more, and you may now glory in being the heiress of Sir Edward’s fortune.”

Although I had always despised her from the day I had overheard her conversation with my Edward, yet in civility I complied with hers and Sir Edward’s entreaties that I would inform them of the whole melancholy affair. They were greatly shocked—Even the obdurate heart of Sir Edward and the insensible one of Augusta were touched with sorrow by the unhappy tale. At the request of your mother I related to them every other misfortune which had befallen me since we parted. Of the imprisonment of Augustus and the absence of Edward—of our arrival in Scotland—of our unexpected meeting with our grandfather and our cousins—of our visit to Macdonald Hall—of the singular service we there performed towards Janetta—of her father’s ingratitude for it. . . . of his inhuman behaviour, unaccountable suspicions, and barbarous treatment of us, in obliging us to leave the house. . . . of our lamentations on the loss of Edward and Augustus and finally of the melancholy death of my beloved companion.

Pity and surprise were strongly depicted in your mother’s countenance, during the whole of my narration, but I am sorry to say, that to the eternal reproach of her sensibility, the latter infinitely predominated. Nay, faultless as my conduct had certainly been during the whole course of my late misfortunes and adventures, she pretended to find fault with my behaviour in many of the situations in which I had been placed. As I was sensible myself, that I had always behaved in a manner which reflected honour on my feelings and refinement, I paid little attention to what she said, and desired her to satisfy my curiosity by informing me how she came there, instead of wounding my spotless reputation with unjustifiable reproaches. As soon as she had complied with my wishes in this particular and had given me an accurate detail of everything that had befallen her since our separation (the particulars of which, if you are not already acquainted with, your mother will give you), I

applied to Augusta for the same information respecting herself, Sir Edward, and Lady Dorothea.

She told me that, having a considerable taste for the beauties of nature, her curiosity to behold the delightful scenes it exhibited in that part of the world had been so much raised by Gilpin's tour to the Highlands,<sup>6</sup> that she had prevailed on her father to undertake a tour of Scotland and had persuaded Lady Dorothea to accompany them. That they had arrived at Edinburgh a few days before and from thence had made daily excursions into the country around in the stage-coach they were then in, from one of which excursions they were at that time returning. My next enquiries were concerning Philippa and her husband, the latter of whom, I learned, having spent all her fortune, had recourse for subsistence to the talent in which he had always most excelled, namely, driving, and that having sold everything which belonged to them, except their coach, had converted it into a stage, and in order to be removed from any of his former acquaintance, had driven it to Edinburgh from whence he went to Sterling<sup>7</sup> every other day; that Philippa, still retaining her affection for her ungrateful husband, had followed him to Scotland and generally accompanied him in his little excursions to Sterling. "It has only been to throw a little money into their pockets (continued Augusta) that my father has always travelled in their coach to view the beauties of the country since our arrival in Scotland—for it would certainly have been much more agreeable to us to visit the Highlands in a post-chaise<sup>8</sup> than merely to travel from Edinburgh to Sterling and from Sterling to Edinburgh, every other day in a crowded and uncomfortable stage." I perfectly agreed with her in her sentiments on the affair, and secretly blamed Sir Edward for thus sacrificing his daughter's pleasure for the sake of a ridiculous old woman, whose folly in marrying so young a man ought to be punished. His behaviour, however, was entirely of a piece with his general character; for what could be expected from a man who possessed not the smallest atom of sensibility, who scarcely knew the meaning of sympathy, and who actually snored—.

Adieu.

## **LETTER THE FIFTEENTH *Laura in continuation***

When we arrived at the town where we were to breakfast, I was determined to speak with Philander and Gustavus, and to that purpose as soon as I left the carriage, I went to the basket and tenderly enquired after their health, expressing my fears of the uneasiness of their situation. At first they seemed rather confused at my appearance, dreading no doubt that I might call them to account for the money which our grandfather had left me and which they had unjustly deprived me of, but finding that I mentioned nothing of the matter, they desired me to step into the basket, as we might there converse with greater ease. Accordingly I entered, and whilst the rest of the party were devouring green tea and buttered toast, we feasted ourselves in a more refined and sentimental manner by a confidential conversation. I informed them of everything which had befallen me during the course of my life, and at my request they related to me every incident of theirs.

"We are the sons, as you already know, of the two youngest daughters which Lord St. Clair had by Laurina, an Italian opera girl. Our mothers could neither of them exactly ascertain who were our fathers; though it is generally believed that Philander is the son of one Philip Jones, a bricklayer, and that my father was Gregory Staves, a stay-maker<sup>9</sup> of Edinburgh. This is, however, of little consequence, for as our mothers were certainly never married to either of them, it reflects no dishonour on our blood, which is of a most ancient and unpolluted kind. Bertha (the mother of Philander) and Agatha (my own mother) always lived together. They were neither of them very rich; their united fortunes had originally amounted to nine thousand pounds, but as they had always lived upon the principal of it, when we were fifteen it was diminished to nine hundred. This nine hundred, they always kept in a drawer in one of the tables which stood in our common sitting parlour, for the convenience of having it always at hand. Whether it was from this

circumstance, of its being easily taken, or from a wish of being independent, or from an excess of sensibility (for which we were always remarkable), I cannot now determine, but certain it is that when we had reached our fifteenth year, we took the nine hundred pounds and ran away. Having obtained this prize we were determined to manage it with economy and not to spend it either with folly or extravagance. To this purpose we therefore divided it into nine parcels, one of which we devoted to victuals, the second to drink, the third to housekeeping, the fourth to carriages, the fifth to horses, the sixth to servants, the seventh to amusements, the eighth to clothes, and the ninth to silver buckles. Having thus arranged our expenses for two months (for we expected to make the nine hundred pounds last as long), we hastened to London and had the good luck to spend it in seven weeks and a day, which was six days sooner than we had intended. As soon as we had thus happily disencumbered ourselves from the weight of so much money, we began to think of returning to our mothers, but accidentally hearing that they were both starved to death, we gave over the design and determined to engage ourselves to some strolling company of players, as we had always a turn for the stage. Accordingly, we offered our services to one and were accepted; our company was indeed rather small, as it consisted only of the manager, his wife, and ourselves, but there were fewer to pay and the only inconvenience attending it was the scarcity of plays, which for want of people to fill the characters we could perform—. We did not mind trifles, however—. One of our most admired performances was *Macbeth*, in which we were truly great. The manager always played *Banquo* himself, his wife my *Lady Macbeth*. I did the *three witches*, and Philander acted *all the rest*. To say the truth, this tragedy was not only the best, but the only play we ever performed; and after having acted it all over England and Wales, we came to Scotland to exhibit it over the remainder of Great Britain. We happened to be quartered in that very town, where you came and met your grandfather—. We were in the inn-yard when his carriage entered and, perceiving by the arms<sup>1</sup> to whom it belonged, and, knowing



that Lord St. Clair was our grandfather, we agreed to endeavour to get something from him by discovering the relationship—. You know how well it succeeded—. Having obtained the two hundred pounds, we instantly left the town, leaving our manager and his wife to act *Macbeth* by themselves, and took the road to Sterling, where we spent our little fortune with great *éclat*.<sup>2</sup> We are now returning to Edinburgh to get some preferment<sup>3</sup> in the acting way; and such, my dear cousin, is our history.”

I thanked the amiable youth for his entertaining narration, and after expressing my wishes for their welfare and happiness, left them in their little habitation and returned to my other friends who impatiently expected me.

My adventures are now drawing to a close, my dearest Marianne; at least for the present.

When we arrived at Edinburgh, Sir Edward told me that, as the widow of his son, he desired I would accept from his hands of four hundred a year. I graciously promised that I would, but could not help observing that the unsympathetic baronet offered it more on account of my being the widow of Edward than in being the refined and amiable Laura.

I took up my residence in a romantic village in the Highlands of Scotland, where I have ever since continued, and where I can, uninterrupted by unmeaning visits, indulge, in a melancholy solitude, my unceasing lamentations for the death of my father, my mother, my husband, and my friend.

Augusta has been for several years united to Graham, the man of all others most suited to her; she became acquainted with him during her stay in Scotland.

Sir Edward, in hopes of gaining an heir to his title and estate, at the same time married Lady Dorothea—. His wishes have been answered.

Philander and Gustavus, after having raised their reputation by their performances in the theatrical line at Edinburgh, removed to Covent Garden, where they still exhibit under the assumed names of *Lewis and Quick*.<sup>4</sup>

Philippa has long paid the debt of nature;<sup>5</sup> her husband, however, still continues to drive the stage-coach from Edinburgh to Sterling:—

Adieu, my dearest Marianne.

Laura

1790

1922

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Illegitimate daughter of a Scottish nobleman and a woman who danced in the ballet corps of an opera company.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: River valley in south Wales that had been celebrated by William Gilpin in his handbook for tourists in quest of picturesque scenes, *Observations on the River Wye* (1782).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Central to the curriculum of female education, “accomplishments” were the skills in music, dance, and drawing that were supposed to make young ladies better companions for their future husbands.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Sensibility, as a term designating the individual’s capacity for sensitive emotional reaction, was celebrated in much late 18th-century literature at the same time that it was studied in medicine, investigations of the human nervous system especially. Sensibility was often linked to sympathy—the ability to enter into the feelings of another person—and hence to pity and benevolence, and was in this context assessed as a source of social harmony.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Literally, the court minuet—the stately formal dance that in the 18th century would begin a ball and be followed by livelier country dances.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Fashionable spa town in the west of England.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Port town in the south of England, in Austen’s home county of Hampshire.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Cottage.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A baronet, a member of the lower aristocracy, is entitled to be called “Sir” and can pass on his title to his son.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Bedfordshire is in the eastern midlands of England. Middlesex is just northwest of London. South Wales is many miles to the southwest of both.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Laura’s father has never been ordained. This marriage is not legal.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The servants mounted on and guiding the horses that draw a coach.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A stage direction in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s comedy *The Critic* (1779) directs the actors playing the mother and son to “faint alternately in each other’s arms.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Conscious, aware.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Writing desk.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, the goods in the house, as property of a debtor who has forfeited them, will be seized by a sheriff’s officer.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: District in London.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Window of the coach.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A prison. That Augustus is thought to be there indicates he has been arrested as a thief rather than as a debtor.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Annual payment of a set sum.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: By speedy and expensive post coach.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The coach, drawn by four horses, is adorned with the image of a crown, indicating its occupant’s noble rank.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Goethe’s novel in letters telling the story of the title character’s hopeless love, was a hit in England when translated from its original German. It is often seen as a founding text of the European Romantic movement.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: A town in southern Scotland, in which marriages of minors could be quickly performed without questions being asked. It was for this reason the destination of many eloping couples during the period.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A breeze; usually one from the west.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Opportune.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Type of open carriage, named for the over-adventurous charioteer of Greek mythology.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The reference is to Cardinal Wolsey's fall from royal grace during the reign of Henry VIII. Laura, like any well-trained schoolgirl of the 18th century, knows how to moralize on topics from English history.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A rapidly developing case of tuberculosis.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Seat for the driver.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The overhanging back compartment on the outside of a stagecoach, where the passengers paying the cheapest fares were seated.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Incapable of feeling, callous.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Gilpin's *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty . . . On Several Parts of Great Britain; Particularly the High-Lands of Scotland* (1789).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Stirling, a town forty miles northeast of Edinburgh.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Augusta wishes that they had hired on their own a smaller, more comfortable carriage, rather than traveling in a public stagecoach that follows a predetermined route.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Maker of corsets.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The coat of arms painted on the side of a nobleman's or noblewoman's carriage.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Conspicuous success (French); literally, brilliant display.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Advancement.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: William Thomas Lewis and John Quick were well-known actors of the late 18th century. Covent Garden was one of the two London theaters licensed by royal patent.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, she has died.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters<sup>1</sup>

Scene to be in the country, heroine the daughter of a clergyman, one who after having lived much in the world had retired from it, and settled in a curacy,<sup>2</sup> with a very small fortune of his own.—He, the most excellent man that can be imagined, perfect in character, temper, and manners—without the smallest drawback or peculiarity to prevent his being the most delightful companion to his daughter from one year's end to the other.—Heroine a faultless character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness and sentiment, and not the least wit—very highly accomplished, understanding modern languages and (generally speaking) everything that the most accomplished young women learn, but particularly excelling in music—her favourite pursuit—and playing equally well on the piano forte and harp—and singing in the first stile. Her person, quite beautiful—dark eyes and plump cheeks.—Book to open with the description of father and daughter—who are to converse in long speeches, elegant language—and a tone of high, serious sentiment.—The father to be induced, at his daughter's earnest request, to relate to her the past events of his life. This narrative will reach through the greatest part of the first volume—as besides all the circumstances of his attachment to her mother and their marriage, it will comprehend his going to sea as chaplain to a distinguished naval character about the court, his going afterwards to court himself, which introduced him to a great variety of characters and involved him in many interesting situations, concluding with his opinion of the benefits to result from tythes being done away, and his having buried his own mother (heroine's lamented grandmother) in consequence of the high priest of the parish in which she died, refusing to pay her remains the respect due to them. The father to be of a very literary turn, an enthusiast in literature, nobody's enemy but his own<sup>3</sup>—at the same

time most zealous in the discharge of his pastoral duties, the model of an exemplary parish priest.<sup>4</sup>—The heroine's friendship to be sought after by a young woman in the same neighbourhood, of talents and shrewdness, with light eyes and a fair skin, but having a considerable degree of wit, heroine shall shrink from the acquaintance.—From this outset, the story will proceed, and contain a striking variety of adventures. Heroine and her father never above a fortnight together in one place,<sup>5</sup> *he* being driven from his curacy by the vile arts of some totally unprincipled and heartless young man, desperately in love with the heroine, and pursuing her with unrelenting passion—no sooner settled in one country of Europe than they are necessitated to quit it and retire to another—always making new acquaintance, and always obliged to leave them.—This will of course exhibit a wide variety of characters—but there will be no mixture; the scene will be for ever shifting from one set of people to another—but all the good will be unexceptionable in every respect—and there will be no foibles or weaknesses but with the wicked, who will be completely depraved and infamous, hardly a resemblance of humanity left in them.—Early in her career, in the progress of her first removals, heroine must meet with the hero—all perfection of course—and only prevented from paying his addresses to her,<sup>6</sup> by some excess of refinement.—Wherever she goes, somebody falls in love with her, and she receives repeated offers of marriage—which she always refers wholly to her father, exceedingly angry that *he* should not be first applied to.—Often carried away by the anti-hero, but rescued either by her father or the hero—often reduced to support herself and her father by her talents and work for her bread;—continually cheated and defrauded of her hire,<sup>7</sup> worn down to a skeleton, and now and then starved to death—. At last, hunted out of civilized society, denied the poor shelter of the humblest cottage, they are compelled to retreat into Kamschatka<sup>8</sup> where the poor father, quite worn down, finding his end approaching, throws himself on the ground, and after four or five hours of tender advice and paternal admonition to his miserable child, expires in a fine burst of literary enthusiasm, intermingled with

invectives again[st] holders of tythes.—Heroine inconsolable for some time—but afterwards crawls back towards her former country—having at least twenty narrow escapes of falling into the hands of anti-hero—and at last in the very nick of time, turning a corner to avoid him, runs into the arms of the hero himself, who having just shaken off the scruples which fetter'd him before, was at the very moment setting off in pursuit of her.—The tenderest and completest eclaircissement<sup>9</sup> takes place, and they are happily united.—Throughout the whole work, heroine to be in the most elegant society and living in high style. The name of the work *not* to be *Emma*—but of the same sort as S & S and P & P.

1816

1870

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Austen's teasing account of the novel she *would* write if she took to heart the advice people gave her about what her fiction ought to be is another manuscript preserved by her family. It was first published in her nephew James Austen-Leigh's *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870). In the original manuscript, Austen supplied marginal glosses, mainly omitted here, indicating the source of each "hint" the "Plan" incorporates. Her would-be advisers included, in addition to the Reverend James Stanier Clarke (the librarian to the Prince Regent), neighbors; family members, most prominently her niece Fanny Knight; a parson, J. G. Sherer, who had been displeased, Austen reported, with her "pictures of clergymen"; and William Gifford, the editor of the *Quarterly Review* as well as the adviser who had read *Emma* for the publisher John Murray.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, settled in the position of curate, the assistant (often badly paid) to the incumbent priest of the parish.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: For this summary of the clergyman's tale that will fill up her novel's projected first volume, Austen lifts a number of



phrases directly from Clarke's letters. Clarke wished to see Austen address the benefits of the abolition of tithes (the taxes supporting the Anglican Church and clergy) and thought his own story of having buried his mother would make good material for her novel.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Mr. Sherer [*Austen's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Many critics [*Austen's note*].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, seeking her hand in marriage.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Wages.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Kamchatka; a peninsula on the eastern edge of Asia, extending into the Bering Sea, acquired by Russia in the 18th century. The novels of Austen's contemporaries tended to be cosmopolitan in setting and often did send heroines wandering across Europe. Austen, however, may be thinking particularly of Sophie de Cottin's *Elizabeth; or Exiles of Siberia* (1806; English translation, 1809).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The clarification of mysteries and misunderstandings that brings a narrative to closure (French).[Return to reference 9](#)

# **WILLIAM HAZLITT**

## **1778–1830**

"I started in life," William Hazlitt wrote, "with the French Revolution, and I have lived, alas! to see the end of it. . . . Since then, I confess, I have no longer felt myself young, for with that my hopes fell." He was born into a radical circle, for the elder William Hazlitt, his father, was a Unitarian minister who declared from the pulpit his advocacy both of American independence and of the French Revolution. When young William was five years old, his father took the family to America in search of liberty and founded the first Unitarian church in Boston, but four years later he returned to settle at Wem, in Shropshire. Despite the persistent attacks of reviewers and the backsliding of his once-radical friends, Hazlitt never wavered in his loyalty to liberty, equality, and the principles behind the overthrow of the monarchy in France. His first literary production, at the age of thirteen, was a letter to a newspaper in indignant protest against the mob that sacked Joseph Priestley's house, when the scientist and preacher had celebrated publicly the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. His last book, published in the year he died, was a four-volume life of Napoleon, in which he expressed a vehement, but qualified, admiration of Napoleon as a man of heroic will and power in the service of the emancipation of mankind.

Hazlitt was a long time finding his vocation. When he attended the Hackney College, London, between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, he plunged into philosophical studies. In 1799 he took up

the study of painting and did not relinquish the ambition to become a portraitist until 1812. His first books dealt with philosophy, economics, and politics; and his first job as a journalist was as parliamentary reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*. It was not until 1813, when he was thirty-six, that he began contributing dramatic criticism and miscellaneous essays to various periodicals and so discovered what he had been born to do. Years of wide reading and hard thinking had made him thoroughly ready: within the next decade he demonstrated himself to be a highly popular lecturer on Shakespeare, Elizabethan drama, and English poetry from Chaucer to his own day; a superb connoisseur of the theater and of painting; a master of the familiar essay; and with Coleridge, one of the two most important literary critics of his time. Coleridge elaborates his theory of poetry as part of a general philosophy of human imagination and human society. Hazlitt, on the other hand, disapproves of what he calls the "modern or metaphysical school of criticism." His distinctive critical gift is to communicate what he calls his "impressions"—that is, the immediacy of his firsthand responses to a passage or work of literature.

Unlike his contemporaries Coleridge, Lamb, and De Quincey, whose writings look back to the elaborate prose stylists of the earlier seventeenth century, Hazlitt developed a fast-moving, hard-hitting prose in a style that he called "plain, point-blank speaking." He wrote, indeed, nearly as fast as he talked, almost without correction and (despite the density of literary quotations) without reference to books or notes. This rapidity was possible only because his essays are relatively planless. Hazlitt characteristically lays down a topic, then piles up relevant observations and instances; the essay accumulates instead of developing; often, it does not round to a conclusion, but simply stops. Hazlitt's prose is unfailingly energetic, but his most satisfying essays, considered as works of literary art, are those that have a narrative subject matter to give him a principle of organization.

In demeanor Hazlitt was awkward and self-conscious; Coleridge described him in 1803 as "brow-hanging, shoe-contemplative,

strange." He had grown up as a member of a highly unpopular minority, in both religion and politics; he found his friends deserting to the side of reaction; and his natural combativeness was exacerbated by the persistent abuse directed against him by writers in the conservative press and periodicals. In the course of his life, he managed to quarrel, in private and in print, with almost everyone whom he had once admired and liked, including Coleridge, Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, and even his most intimate and enduring friend, Lamb. But what appealed to his admirers, as to modern readers of his essays, is his courage and uncompromising honesty, and above all his zest for life in its diversity—including even, as he announced in the title of an essay, "The Pleasure of Hating." He relished, and was able to convey completely, the particular qualities of things—a passage of poetry, a painting, a natural prospect, or a well-directed blow in a prize fight. Despite the recurrent frustrations of his fifty-two years of existence, he was able to say, with his last breath, "Well, I've had a happy life."

# ***From Characters of Shakespeare's Plays***

## ***From Coriolanus***<sup>1</sup>

Shakespear has in this play shewn himself well versed in history and state-affairs. *Coriolanus* is a store-house of political commonplaces. Any one who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke's Reflections, or Paine's Rights of Man, or the Debates in both Houses of Parliament since the French Revolution or our own.<sup>2</sup> The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of the many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher. Shakespear himself seems to have had a leaning to the arbitrary side of the question,<sup>3</sup> perhaps from some feeling of contempt for his own origin; and to have spared no occasion of baiting the rabble. What he says of them is very true: what he says of their betters is also very true, though he dwells less upon it.—The cause of the people is indeed but little calculated as a subject for poetry: it admits of rhetoric, which goes into argument and explanation, but it presents no immediate or distinct images to the mind, "no jutting frieze, buttress, or coigne of vantage" for poetry "to make its pendant bed and procreant cradle in."<sup>4</sup> The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty: it takes from one thing to add to another: it accumulates circumstances together to give the greatest possible effect to a favourite object. The understanding is a dividing and measuring faculty: it judges of things, not according to their immediate impression on the mind, but according to their relations to one another. The one is a monopolizing faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement by inequality and disproportion; the other is a distributive faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good, by justice and proportion. The

one is an aristocratical, the other a republican faculty. The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is every thing by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. It presents a dazzling appearance. It shews its head turretted, crowned, and crested. Its front is gilt and bloodstained. Before it "it carries noise, and behind it tears."<sup>5</sup> It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices.<sup>6</sup> Kings, priests, nobles, are its train-bearers, tyrants and slaves its executioners.—"Carnage is its daughter."<sup>7</sup>—Poetry is right-royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right. A lion hunting a flock of sheep or a herd of wild asses, is a more poetical object than they; and we even take part with the lordly beast, because our vanity or some other feeling makes us disposed to place ourselves in the situation of the strongest party. So we feel some concern for the poor citizens of Rome when they meet together to compare their wants and grievances, till Coriolanus comes in, and with blows and big words drives this set of "poor rats," this rascal scum, to their homes and beggary before him.<sup>8</sup> There is nothing heroical in a multitude of miserable rogues not wishing to be starved, or complaining that they are like to be so: but when a single man comes forward to brave their cries and to make them submit to the last indignities, from mere pride and self-will, our admiration of his prowess is immediately converted into contempt for their pusillanimity. The insolence of power is stronger than the plea of necessity. The tame submission to usurped authority or even the natural resistance to it has nothing to excite or flatter the imagination: it is the assumption of a right to insult or oppress others that carries an imposing air of superiority with it. We had rather be the oppressor than the oppressed. The love of power in ourselves and the admiration of it in others are both natural to man: the one makes him a tyrant, the other a slave. Wrong dressed out in pride, pomp, and circumstance has more attraction than abstract right.—Coriolanus complains of the fickleness of the people: yet the instant he cannot gratify his pride and obstinacy at their expense, he

turns his arms against his country. If his country was not worth defending, why did he build his pride on its defence? He is a conqueror and a hero; he conquers other countries, and makes this a plea for enslaving his own; and when he is prevented from doing so, he leagues with its enemies to destroy his country. He rates the people "as if he were a God to punish, and not a man of their infirmity."<sup>9</sup> He scoffs at one of their tribunes for maintaining their rights and franchises: "Mark you his absolute *shall*?"<sup>1</sup> not marking his own absolute *will* to take every thing from them, his impatience of the slightest opposition to his own pretensions being in proportion to their arrogance and absurdity. If the great and powerful had the beneficence and wisdom of Gods, then all this would have been well: if with a greater knowledge of what is good for the people, they had as great a care for their interest as they have themselves, if they were seated above the world, sympathising with the welfare, but not feeling the passions of men, receiving neither good nor hurt from them, but bestowing their benefits as free gifts on them, they might then rule over them like another Providence. But this is not the case. Coriolanus is unwilling that the senate should shew their "cares" for the people, lest their "cares" should be construed into "fears," to the subversion of all due authority; and he is no sooner disappointed in his schemes to deprive the people not only of the cares of the state, but of all power to redress themselves, than Volumnia is made madly to exclaim,

"Now the red pestilence strike all trades in Rome,  
And occupations perish."<sup>2</sup>

This is but natural: it is but natural for a mother to have more regard for her son than for a whole city; but then the city should be left to take some care of itself. The care of the state cannot, we here see, be safely entrusted to maternal affection, or to the domestic charities of high life. The great have private feelings of their own, to which the interests of humanity and justice must courtesy. Their interests are so far from being the same as those of the community, that they are in direct and necessary opposition to them; their power

is at the expense of *our* weakness; their riches of *our* poverty; their pride of *our* degradation; their splendour of *our* wretchedness; their tyranny of *our* servitude. If they had the superior knowledge ascribed to them (which they have not) it would only render them so much more formidable; and from Gods would convert them into Devils. The whole dramatic moral of *Coriolanus* is that those who have little shall have less, and that those who have much shall take all that others have left. The people are poor; therefore they ought to be starved. They are slaves; therefore they ought to be beaten. They work hard; therefore they ought to be treated like beasts of burden. They are ignorant; therefore they ought not to be allowed to feel that they want food, or clothing, or rest, that they are enslaved, oppressed, and miserable. This is the logic of the imagination and the passions; which seek to aggrandise what excites admiration and to heap contempt on misery, to raise power into tyranny, and to make tyranny absolute; to thrust down that which is low still lower, and to make wretches desperate: to exalt magistrates into kings, kings into gods; to degrade subjects to the rank of slaves, and slaves to the condition of brutes. The history of mankind is a romance, a mask, a tragedy, constructed upon the principles of *poetical justice*; it is a noble or royal hunt, in which what is sport to the few, is death to the many,<sup>3</sup> and in which the spectators halloo and encourage the strong to set upon the weak, and cry havoc in the chase, though they do not share in the spoil. We may depend upon it that what men delight to read in books, they will put in practice in reality.

\* \* \*

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 1: In this chapter from Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), discussion of Shakespeare's tragedy



*Coriolanus*, which Hazlitt had watched performed in 1816, occasions a provoking exploration of the poetic imagination's relationship to politics and political justice. The essay was fueled by Hazlitt's gloom over the repressive politics of the day and his disappointment with the poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular, who appeared to have forsaken their commitment to the cause of liberty. Shakespeare's play had taken the political structures of classical Rome during its republican era and mapped them onto his own time and place. Hazlitt's essay does the same with *Coriolanus*, finding in the play a mirror of the political situation in Regency England, as well as probing the role that aesthetic pleasure has played in upholding that situation.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: That is, Britain's Glorious Revolution of 1688, which expelled the Stuart dynasty from the throne. Edmund Burke's attack on the French people's pursuit of liberty in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, from 1790, was followed in 1791 by Thomas Paine's defense of the Revolution in his pamphlet *Rights of Man*. For excerpts from their texts, see "An Age of Revolutions" (p. 189, above).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, Shakespeare favored despotism over democracy.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: From *Macbeth* 1.6.6–8: Banquo, entering Macbeth's castle with King Duncan, describes how martins have made their nests in the castle walls.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: "Before him he carries noise, and behind him he leaves tears": lines from *Coriolanus* 2.1.144–45 applied to Shakespeare's protagonist on his triumphal return from military campaigning.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Hazlitt mimes Burke's syntax in a passage in *Reflections* in which Burke declares that, unlike the liberty of the French revolutionists, the liberty the English cherish "has a pedigree and illustrating ancestors": "It has its bearings and its ensigns armorial. It has its gallery of portraits; its monumental inscriptions; its records, evidences, and titles."[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: A strategically placed citation of Wordsworth's 1816 "Thanksgiving Ode" in which, celebrating the victory against Napoleon at Waterloo, Wordsworth seemed to announce also his new role as a defender of the political establishment. Wordsworth writes there that God's most dreaded instrument "in working out a pure intent / Is Man—arrayed for mutual slaughter— / Yes, Carnage is Thy Daughter."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Hazlitt refers to the opening scene of *Coriolanus*, in which Shakespeare's protagonist scornfully dismisses a mob of the Roman common people who have gathered to protest a food shortage. When this fierce veteran of Rome's wars is later convinced to run for a position as a Roman consul, he will prove catastrophically incapable of the maneuvering that would ensure his survival in the realm of politics. Banished, Coriolanus turns on the city he once served.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: *Coriolanus* 3.1.85–86.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *Coriolanus* 3.1.92–93.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *Coriolanus* 4.1.14–15: language with which Coriolanus's mother curses Rome for banishing her son.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Echoing a line from a fable of Aesop's, in which boys playing near a pond spot some frogs and begin pelting them with stones. One frog cries out for the boys to stop: "What is sport to you, is death to us."[Return to reference 3](#)

## On Going a Journey

One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me. I am then never less alone than when alone.<sup>1</sup>

The fields his study, nature was his book.<sup>2</sup>

I cannot see the wit of walking and talking at the same time. When I am in the country, I wish to vegetate like the country. I am not for criticizing hedgerows and black cattle. I go out of town in order to forget the town and all that is in it. There are those who for this purpose go to watering places;<sup>3</sup> and carry the metropolis with them. I like more elbowroom, and fewer encumbrances. I like solitude, when I give myself up to it, for the sake of solitude; nor do I ask for

—a friend in my retreat,  
Whom I may whisper solitude is sweet.<sup>4</sup>

The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do just as one pleases. We go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others. It is because I want a little breathing space to muse on indifferent matters, where Contemplation

May plume her feathers and let grow her wings,  
That in the various bustle of resort  
Were all too ruffled, and sometimes impaired,<sup>5</sup>

that I absent myself from the town for awhile, without feeling at a loss the moment I am left by myself. Instead of a friend in a post chaise or in a tilbury,<sup>6</sup> to exchange good things with, and vary the

same stale topics over again, for once let me have a truce with impertinence. Give me the clear blue sky over my head, and the green turf beneath my feet, a winding road before me, and a three hours' march to dinner—and then to thinking! It is hard if I cannot start some game on these lone heaths. I laugh, I run, I leap, I sing for joy. From the point of yonder rolling cloud, I plunge into my past being, and revel there, as the sunburnt Indian plunges headlong into the wave that wafts him to his native shore. Then long-forgotten things, like "sunken wrack and sumless treasures,"<sup>7</sup> burst upon my eager sight, and I begin to feel, think, and be myself again. Instead of an awkward silence, broken by attempts at wit or dull commonplaces, mine is that undisturbed silence of the heart which alone is perfect eloquence. No one likes puns, alliterations, antitheses, argument, and analysis better than I do; but I sometimes had rather be without them. "Leave, oh, leave me to my repose!"<sup>8</sup> I have just now other business in hand, which would seem idle to you, but is with me "the very stuff of the conscience."<sup>9</sup> Is not this wild rose sweet without a comment? Does not this daisy leap to my heart, set in its coat of emerald? Yet if I were to explain to you the circumstance that has so endeared it to me, you would only smile. Had I not better then keep it to myself, and let it serve me to brood over, from here to yonder craggy point, and from thence onward to the far distant horizon? I should be but bad company all that way, and therefore prefer being alone. I have heard it said that you may, when the moody fit comes on, walk or ride on by yourself, and indulge your reveries. But this looks like a breach of manners, a neglect of others, and you are thinking all the time that you ought to rejoin your party. "Out upon such half-faced fellowship,"<sup>1</sup> say I. I like to be either entirely to myself, or entirely at the disposal of others; to talk or be silent, to walk or sit still, to be sociable or solitary. I was pleased with an observation of Mr. Cobbett's,<sup>2</sup> that "he thought it a bad French custom to drink our wine with our meals, and that an Englishman ought to do only one thing at a time." So I cannot talk and think, or indulge in melancholy musing and lively conversation by fits and starts. "Let me have a companion of my way," says

Sterne, "were it but to remark how the shadows lengthen as the sun goes down."<sup>3</sup> It is beautifully said: but in my opinion, this continual comparing of notes interferes with the involuntary impression of things upon the mind, and hurts the sentiment. If you only hint what you feel in a kind of dumb show,<sup>4</sup> it is insipid; if you have to explain it, it is making a toil of a pleasure. You cannot read the book of nature, without being perpetually put to the trouble of translating it for the benefit of others. I am for the synthetical method on a journey, in preference to the analytical. I am content to lay in a stock of ideas then, and to examine and anatomize them afterwards. I want to see my vague notions float like the down of the thistle before the breeze, and not to have them entangled in the briars and thorns of controversy. For once, I like to have it all my own way; and this is impossible unless you are alone, or in such company as I do not covet. I have no objection to argue a point with any one for twenty miles of measured road, but not for pleasure. If you remark the scent of a beanfield crossing the road, perhaps your fellow traveler has no smell. If you point to a distant object, perhaps he is shortsighted, and has to take out his glass to look at it. There is a feeling in the air, a tone in the color of a cloud which hits your fancy, but the effect of which you are unprepared to account for. There is then no sympathy, but an uneasy craving after it, and a dissatisfaction which pursues you on the way, and in the end probably produces ill humor. Now I never quarrel with myself, and take all my own conclusions for granted till I find it necessary to defend them against objections. It is not merely that you may not be of accord on the objects and circumstances that present themselves before you—they may recall a number of ideas, and lead to associations too delicate and refined to be possibly communicated to others. Yet these I love to cherish, and sometimes still fondly clutch them, when I can escape from the throng to do so. To give way to our feelings before company seems extravagance or affectation; on the other hand, to have to unravel this mystery of our being at every turn, and to make others take an equal interest in it (otherwise the end is not answered) is a task to which few are competent. We must

“give it an understanding, but no tongue.”<sup>5</sup> My old friend C——,<sup>6</sup> however, could do both. He could go on in the most delightful explanatory way over hill and dale, a summer’s day, and convert a landscape into a didactic poem or a Pindaric ode. “He talked far above singing.”<sup>7</sup> If I could so clothe my ideas in sounding and flowing words, I might perhaps wish to have someone with me to admire the swelling theme; or I could be more content, were it possible for me still to hear his echoing voice in the woods of All-Foxden.<sup>8</sup> They had “that fine madness in them which our first poets had”;<sup>9</sup> and if they could have been caught by some rare instrument, would have breathed such strains as the following.

—Here be woods as green  
As any, air likewise as fresh and sweet  
As when smooth Zephyrus plays on the fleet  
Face of the curled stream, with flow’rs as many  
As the young spring gives, and as choice as any;  
Here be all new delights, cool streams and wells,  
Arbors o’ergrown with woodbine, caves, and dells:  
Choose where thou wilt, while I sit by and sing,  
Or gather rushes to make many a ring  
For thy long fingers; tell thee tales of love,  
How the pale Phoebe, hunting in a grove,  
First saw the boy Endymion, from whose eyes  
She took eternal fire that never dies;  
How she conveyed him softly in a sleep,  
His temples bound with poppy, to the steep  
Head of old Latmos, where she stoops each night,  
Gilding the mountain with her brother’s light,  
To kiss her sweetest.—

FAITHFUL SHEPHERDESS.<sup>1</sup>

Had I words and images at command like these, I would attempt to wake the thoughts that lie slumbering on golden ridges in the

evening clouds: but at the sight of nature my fancy, poor as it is, droops and closes up its leaves, like flowers at sunset. I can make nothing out on the spot: I must have time to collect myself.

In general, a good thing spoils out-of-door prospects: it should be reserved for table talk. L——<sup>2</sup> is for this reason, I take it, the worst company in the world out of doors; because he is the best within. I grant, there is one subject on which it is pleasant to talk on a journey; and that is, what one shall have for supper when we get to our inn at night. The open air improves this sort of conversation or friendly altercation, by setting a keener edge on appetite. Every mile of the road heightens the flavor of the viands we expect at the end of it. How fine it is to enter some old town, walled and turreted, just at the approach of nightfall, or to come to some straggling village, with the lights streaming through the surrounding gloom; and then after inquiring for the best entertainment that the place affords, to “take one’s ease at one’s inn!”<sup>3</sup> These eventful moments in our lives are in fact too precious, too full of solid, heartfelt happiness to be frittered and dribbled away in imperfect sympathy. I would have them all to myself, and drain them to the last drop: they will do to talk of or to write about afterwards. What a delicate speculation it is, after drinking whole goblets of tea,

The cups that cheer, but not inebriate,<sup>4</sup>

and letting the fumes ascend into the brain, to sit considering what we shall have for supper—eggs and a rasher,<sup>5</sup> a rabbit smothered in onions, or an excellent veal cutlet! Sancho in such a situation once fixed upon cow-heel;<sup>6</sup> and his choice, though he could not help it, is not to be disparaged. Then in the intervals of pictured scenery and Shandean contemplation,<sup>7</sup> to catch the preparation and the stir in the kitchen—*Procul, O procul este profani!*<sup>8</sup> These hours are sacred to silence and to musing, to be treasured up in the memory, and to feed the source of smiling thoughts hereafter. I would not waste them in idle talk; or if I must have the integrity of fancy broken in upon, I would rather it were by a stranger than a friend. A stranger



takes his hue and character from the time and place; he is a part of the furniture and costume of an inn. If he is a Quaker, or from the West Riding<sup>9</sup> of Yorkshire, so much the better. I do not even try to sympathize with him, and he *breaks no squares*.<sup>1</sup> I associate nothing with my traveling companion but present objects and passing events. In his ignorance of me and my affairs, I in a manner forget myself. But a friend reminds one of other things, rips up old grievances, and destroys the abstraction of the scene. He comes in ungraciously between us and our imaginary character. Something is dropped in the course of conversation that gives a hint of your profession and pursuits; or from having someone with you that knows the less sublime portions of your history, it seems that other people do. You are no longer a citizen of the world: but your “unhoused free condition is put into circumscription and confine.”<sup>2</sup> The *incognito* of an inn is one of its striking privileges—“lord of oneself, uncumbered with a name,”<sup>3</sup> Oh! it is great to shake off the trammels of the world and of public opinion—to lose our importunate, tormenting, everlasting personal identity in the elements of nature, and become the creature of the moment, clear of all ties—to hold to the universe only by a dish of sweetbreads, and to owe nothing but the score<sup>4</sup> of the evening—and no longer seeking for applause and meeting with contempt, to be known by no other title than *the Gentleman in the parlor!* One may take one’s choice of all characters in this romantic state of uncertainty as to one’s real pretensions, and become indefinitely respectable and negatively right-worshipful. We baffle prejudice and disappoint conjecture; and from being so to others, begin to be objects of curiosity and wonder even to ourselves. We are no more those hackneyed commonplaces that we appear in the world: an inn restores us to the level of nature, and quits scores<sup>5</sup> with society! I have certainly spent some enviable hours at inns—sometimes when I have been left entirely to myself, and have tried to solve some metaphysical problem, as once at Witham Common,<sup>6</sup> where I found out the proof that likeness is not a case of the association of ideas—at other times, when there have been pictures in the room, as at St.



Neot's (I think it was), where I first met with Gribelin's engravings of the Cartoons,<sup>7</sup> into which I entered at once; and at a little inn on the borders of Wales, where there happened to be hanging some of Westall's drawings,<sup>8</sup> which I compared triumphantly (for a theory that I had, not for the admired artist) with the figure of a girl who had ferried me over the Severn, standing up in the boat between me and the fading twilight—at other times I might mention luxuriating in books, with a peculiar interest in this way, as I remember sitting up half the night to read *Paul and Virginia*,<sup>9</sup> which I picked up at an inn at Bridge-water, after being drenched in the rain all day; and at the same place I got through two volumes of Madame D'Arblay's *Camilla*.<sup>1</sup> It was on the tenth of April, 1798, that I sat down to a volume of the *New Eloise*, at the inn at Llangollen,<sup>2</sup> over a bottle of sherry and a cold chicken. The letter I chose was that in which St. Preux describes his feelings as he first caught a glimpse from the heights of the Jura of the Pays de Vaud, which I had brought with me as a *bonne bouche*<sup>3</sup> to crown the evening with. It was my birthday, and I had for the first time come from a place in the neighborhood to visit this delightful spot. The road to Llangollen turns off between Chirk and Wrexham; and on passing a certain point, you come all at once upon the valley, which opens like an amphitheater, broad, barren hills rising in majestic state on either side, with "green upland swells that echo to the bleat of flocks"<sup>4</sup> below, and the river Dee babbling over its stony bed in the midst of them. The valley at this time "glittered green with sunny showers," and a budding ash tree dipped its tender branches in the chiding stream. How proud, how glad I was to walk along the high road that commanded the delicious prospect, repeating the lines which I have just quoted from Mr. Coleridge's poems! But besides the prospect which opened beneath my feet, another also opened to my inward sight, a heavenly vision, on which were written, in letters large as Hope could make them, these four words, LIBERTY, GENIUS, LOVE, VIRTUE; which have since faded into the light of common day, or mock my idle gaze.

The beautiful is vanished, and returns not.<sup>5</sup>

Still I would return some time or other to this enchanted spot; but I would return to it alone. What other self could I find to share that influx of thoughts, of regret, and delight, the traces of which I could hardly conjure up to myself, so much have they been broken and defaced! I could stand on some tall rock, and overlook the precipice of years that separates me from what I then was. I was at that time going shortly to visit the poet whom I have above named. Where is he now? Not only I myself have changed; the world, which was then new to me, has become old and incorrigible. Yet will I turn to thee in thought, O sylvan Dee, as then thou wert, in joy, in youth and gladness; and thou shalt always be to me the river of Paradise, where I will drink of the waters of life freely!<sup>6</sup>

There is hardly any thing that shows the shortsightedness or capriciousness of the imagination more than traveling does. With change of place we change our ideas; nay, our opinions and feelings. We can by an effort indeed transport ourselves to old and long-forgotten scenes, and then the picture of the mind revives again;<sup>7</sup> but we forget those that we have just left. It seems that we can think but of one place at a time. The canvas of the fancy has only a certain extent, and if we paint one set of objects upon it, they immediately efface every other. We cannot enlarge our conceptions; we only shift our point of view. The landscape bares its bosom to the enraptured eye; we take our fill of it; and seem as if we could form no other image of beauty or grandeur. We pass on, and think no more of it: the horizon that shuts it from our sight also blots it from our memory like a dream. In traveling through a wild barren country, I can form no idea of a woody and cultivated one. It appears to me that all the world must be barren, like what I see of it. In the country we forget the town, and in town we despise the country. "Beyond Hyde Park," says Sir Fopling Flutter, "all is a desert."<sup>8</sup> All that part of the map that we do not see before us is a blank. The world in our conceit of it is not much bigger than a nutshell. It is not one prospect expanded into another, county joined to county;

kingdom to kingdom, lands to seas, making an image voluminous and vast—the mind can form no larger idea of space than the eye can take in at a single glance. The rest is a name written on a map, a calculation of arithmetic. For instance, what is the true signification of that immense mass of territory and population, known by the name of China to us? An inch of pasteboard on a wooden globe, of no more account than a China orange! Things near us are seen of the size of life: things at a distance are diminished to the size of the understanding. We measure the universe by ourselves, and even comprehend the texture of our own being only piecemeal. In this way, however, we remember an infinity of things and places. The mind is like a mechanical instrument that plays a great variety of tunes, but it must play them in succession. One idea recalls another, but it at the same time excludes all others. In trying to renew old recollections, we cannot as it were unfold the whole web of our existence; we must pick out the single threads. So in coming to a place where we have formerly lived and with which we have intimate associations, everyone must have found that the feeling grows more vivid the nearer we approach the spot, from the mere anticipation of the actual impression: we remember circumstances, feelings, persons, faces, names, that we had not thought of for years; but for the time all the rest of the world is forgotten!—To return to the question I have quitted above.

I have no objection to go to see ruins, aqueducts, pictures, in company with a friend or a party, but rather the contrary, for the former reason reversed. They are intelligible matters, and will bear talking about. The sentiment here is not tacit, but communicable and overt. Salisbury Plain is barren of criticism, but Stonehenge<sup>9</sup> will bear a discussion antiquarian, picturesque, and philosophical. In setting out on a party of pleasure, the first consideration always is where we shall go: in taking a solitary ramble, the question is what we shall meet with by the way. “The mind then is its own place”;<sup>1</sup> nor are we anxious to arrive at the end of our journey. I can myself do the honors indifferently well to works of art and curiosity. I once

took a party to Oxford with no mean *éclat*—showed them the seat of the Muses at a distance,

With glistering spires and pinnacles adorned<sup>2</sup>—

descanted on the learned air that breathes from the grassy quadrangles and stone walls of halls and colleges—was at home in the Bodleian; and at Blenheim quite superseded the powdered Ciceroni that attended us,<sup>3</sup> and that pointed in vain with his wand to commonplace beauties in matchless pictures.—As another exception to the above reasoning, I should not feel confident in venturing on a journey in a foreign country without a companion. I should want at intervals to hear the sound of my own language. There is an involuntary antipathy in the mind of an Englishman to foreign manners and notions that requires the assistance of social sympathy to carry it off. As the distance from home increases, this relief, which was at first a luxury, becomes a passion and an appetite. A person would almost feel stifled to find himself in the deserts of Arabia without friends and countrymen: there must be allowed to be something in the view of Athens or old Rome that claims the utterance of speech; and I own that the Pyramids are too mighty for any single contemplation. In such situations, so opposite to all one's ordinary train of ideas, one seems a species by oneself, a limb torn off from society, unless one can meet with instant fellowship and support.—Yet I did not feel this want or craving very pressing once, when I first set my foot on the laughing shores of France. Calais was peopled with novelty and delight. The confused, busy murmur of the place was like oil and wine poured into my ears; nor did the mariners' hymn, which was sung from the top of an old crazy vessel in the harbor, as the sun went down, send an alien sound into my soul. I breathed the air of general humanity. I walked over "the vine-covered hills and gay regions of France,"<sup>4</sup> erect and satisfied; for the image of man was not cast down and chained to the foot of arbitrary thrones. I was at no loss for language, for that of all the great schools of painting was open to me. The whole is vanished like a shade. Pictures, heroes, glory, freedom, all are fled: nothing remains

but the Bourbons<sup>5</sup> and the French people!—There is undoubtedly a sensation in traveling into foreign parts that is to be had nowhere else: but it is more pleasing at the time than lasting. It is too remote from our habitual associations to be a common topic of discourse or reference, and, like a dream or another state of existence, does not piece into our daily modes of life. It is an animated but a momentary hallucination. It demands an effort to exchange our actual for our ideal identity; and to feel the pulse of our old transports revive very keenly, we must “jump”<sup>6</sup> all our present comforts and connexions. Our romantic and itinerant character is not to be domesticated. Dr. Johnson remarked how little foreign travel added to the facilities of conversation in those who had been abroad.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the time we have spent there is both delightful and in one sense instructive; but it appears to be cut out of our substantial, downright existence, and never to join kindly on to it. We are not the same, but another, and perhaps more enviable individual, all the time we are out of our own country. We are lost to ourselves, as well as to our friends. So the poet somewhat quaintly sings,

Out of my country and myself I go.<sup>8</sup>

Those who wish to forget painful thoughts, do well to absent themselves for a while from the ties and objects that recall them: but we can be said only to fulfill our destiny in the place that gave us birth. I should on this account like well enough to spend the whole of my life in traveling abroad, if I could any where borrow another life to spend afterwards at home!

1822, 1825

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Silently quoting the Roman Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.), who, both in *On the Commonwealth* (book 1) and *On Duties* (book 3), reports the aphorism as having been recorded by Cato the Elder, an earlier Roman statesman, from the conversation of his

compatriot Scipio Africanus: "I am never less at leisure than when I am at leisure, never less alone than when I am alone."[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: "Spring," line 32, in *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) by Robert Bloomfield, a working-class poet.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Bathing resorts.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: William Cowper, *Retirement* (1782), lines 741–42.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Milton, *Comus*, lines 378–80.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Lightweight, open, two-wheeled carriage; "post chaise": hired carriage.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Shakespeare, *Henry V* 1.2.165.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A refrain in Thomas Gray's *The Descent of Odin: An Ode* (1768).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.2.2.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Shakespeare, *I Henry IV* 1.3.208.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: William Cobbett (1763–1835), author of *Rural Rides* (1830), in which he comments upon the conditions he observed while on an inspection tour of rural England.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Altered from Laurence Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (1760–69), vol. 3.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An episode of pantomime in early English dramas.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: *Hamlet* 1.2.250.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Coleridge.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Beaumont and Fletcher's tragicomedy *Philaster* (1611), 5.5.165–66: "I did hear you talk, / Far above singing."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Hazlitt had visited Coleridge and Wordsworth at Alfoxden, Somersetshire, in 1798.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Altered from Michael Drayton's *Elegy to \* \* \* Henry Reynolds Esquire* (1627), lines 109–10.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: John Fletcher, *The Faithful Shepherdess* (a pastoral drama, 1610), 1.3. Phoebe (also known as Diana) is the moon goddess who fell in love with the handsome young shepherd



Endymion on Mount Latmus, in southwestern Anatolia. "Her brother's light" is that of Apollo, the sun god.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Charles Lamb. "Table talk": mealtime conversation.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Altered from *I Henry IV* 3.3.68–69.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: William Cowper, *The Task* 4.39–40.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A thin slice of bacon or ham.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The foot of a cow stewed so as to make a jelly. The episode occurs in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, part 2 (1615), chapter 49.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: An allusion to the seemingly random associations of ideas in the speech and thought of the characters in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760–67).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "Away! away! ye unhallowed ones!" Cried out by the priestess as she calls up Hecate, goddess of the underworld (Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.258).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The western division.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, doesn't change the circumstances. ("To break squares" meant to violate the regular order of doing something.)[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.2.26–27.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Dryden, *To My Honored Kinsman, John Driden* (1700), line 18. "Incognito": anonymity; with one's name undivulged.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Bill for food and drink.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Clears off debts.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In Somersetshire.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Simon Gribelin (1661–1733), who made engraved copies of the cartoons (full-scale drawings) that Raphael had designed for tapestries to be hung on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, in the Vatican. "St. Neot's": a town in Huntingdonshire.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Richard Westall (1765–1838), an English painter. The Severn is a river flowing through Wales and western England.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: *Paul et Virginie* was a widely read novel of sentiment by the French author Bernardin de St. Pierre in 1787.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *Camilla, or a Picture of Youth* (1796), a novel by Madame D'Arblay, whose maiden name was Frances Burney.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A town in Wales. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is a novel by Rousseau published in 1761; the hero is St. Preux. The "Jura" is a mountain range on the French-Swiss border; the "Pays de Vaud" is a canton in Switzerland.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A sugary dessert, eaten after a meal.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Coleridge, "Ode to the Departing Year" (1796), lines 125–26; the quotation that follows ("glittered green . . .") is from the same poem, line 124.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: From Coleridge's translation of Schiller's drama *The Death of Wallenstein* (1799–1800), 5.1.68. "Faded into the light of common day" is a reminiscence of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," line 77.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: See the description of the Garden of Eden, Genesis 2:8–10.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A reminiscence of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," line 61.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The line is in fact spoken by Harriet, the heroine of George Etherege's Restoration comedy *The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676), 5.2. Hyde Park, in London, was favored by people of fashion.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The prehistoric circle of upright slabs of stone, on Salisbury Plain.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: *Paradise Lost* 1.254.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *Paradise Lost* 3.550. "Eclat": pomp. The "party" consisted of Charles and Mary Lamb.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: *Cicerone* is Italian for a guide. The Bodleian is the central library at Oxford. Blenheim Palace, at Woodstock, near Oxford, was built for the Duke of Marlborough in 1704.[Return to reference 3](#)



- Note 4: From William Roscoe's *Song Written for . . . the Anniversary of 14th August, 1791*. Hazlitt had visited France in 1802–03 to make copies of paintings in the Louvre.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The French royal family, which had been deposed during the revolution, was restored in 1814 after the fall of Napoleon.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Abandon, leave behind.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, entry for May 13, 1778.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: From the poem *Voyage to Parnassus* by Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), as Cervantes bids farewell to Madrid.[Return to reference 8](#)

# **THOMAS DE QUINCEY**

## **1785–1859**

Born in Manchester, the son of a wealthy merchant involved in the West Indian cotton trade, Thomas De Quincey was the fourth of eight children. Before his tenth birthday he experienced the deaths of a series of family members, his father included; the loss that more than any other haunted him his entire life was that of his favorite sister and "nursery playmate," Elizabeth, two years his senior, who died suddenly in 1792. Sent from home to school at seven, De Quincey was a precocious scholar, especially in Latin and Greek, and a gentle and bookish introvert; he found it difficult to adapt himself to discipline and routine and was thrown into panic by any emergency that called for decisive action. He ran away from Manchester Grammar School and, after a summer spent tramping through Wales, broke off completely from his family and guardians and went to London in the hope that he could obtain from moneylenders an advance on his prospective inheritance. There at the age of seventeen he spent a terrible winter of loneliness and poverty, befriended only by some kindly sex workers. These early experiences with the sinister aspect of city life later became persistent elements in his dreams of terror.

After a reconciliation with his guardians, he entered Worcester College, Oxford, on an inadequate allowance. He spent the years 1803–8 in sporadic attendance, isolated as usual, then left abruptly

in the middle of his examination for the A.B. with honors because he could not face the ordeal of an oral examination.

De Quincey had been an early admirer of Wordsworth and Coleridge. No sooner did he come of age and into his inheritance than, with his usual combination of generosity and recklessness, he made Coleridge an anonymous gift of £300. He became an intimate friend of the Wordsworths at Grasmere, and when they left Dove Cottage for Allan Bank, a larger house in the same village, took up his own residence at Dove Cottage to be near them. For a time he lived the life of a rural scholar, but then fell in love with Margaret Simpson, the daughter of a minor local landholder and farmer and, after they had a son, married her in February 1817. This affair led to an estrangement from the Wordsworths and left him in severe financial difficulties. Worse still, De Quincey at this time became completely enslaved to opium. Following the ordinary medical practice of the time, he had been taking the drug for a variety of painful ailments; but now, driven by poverty and despair as well as pain, he indulged in huge quantities of laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol) and was never thereafter able to free himself from addiction to what he called "the pleasures and pains of opium." It was during periods of maximum use, and especially in the recurrent agonies of cutting down his opium dosage, that he experienced the grotesque and terrifying reveries and nightmares that he wove into his literary fantasies.

Desperate for income, De Quincey at last turned to writing at the age of thirty-six. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, which he contributed to the *London Magazine*, scored an immediate success and was at once reprinted as a book, but it earned him little money. In 1828 he moved with his three children to Edinburgh, to write for *Blackwood's Magazine*. For almost the rest of his life, he led a harried existence, beset by many physical ills, struggling with his indecisiveness and depression and the horrors of the opium habit, dodging his creditors and the constant threat of imprisonment for debt. All the while he ground out articles on any salable subject in a ceaseless struggle to keep his children, who ultimately numbered

eight, from starving to death. Only after his mother died and left him a small income was he able, in his sixties, to live in comparative ease and freedom under the care of his devoted and practical-minded daughters. His last decade he spent mainly in gathering, revising, and expanding his essays for his "Collective Edition"; the final volume appeared in 1860, the year after his death.

De Quincey's life was chaotic, and in tone his best-known writings run the gamut from quirky wit to nightmarish sensationalism. Nonetheless, he was a conventional and conservative person—a rigid moralist, a Tory, and a faithful champion of the Church of England. Everybody who knew him testified to his gentleness, his courteous and musical speech, and his exquisite manners. Less obvious, under the surface timidity and irresolution, were the toughness and courage that sustained him through a long life of seemingly hopeless struggle.

A voracious reader (when he absconded from school, he was slowed down by a weighty trunk of books he was determined to take with him), De Quincey was a writer of encyclopedic intellectual interests and great versatility. A new twenty-one volume edition of his collected works encompasses the many essays he wrote on the philosophy and literature of Germany, as well as a book that explained the highly technical theories of value outlined by the economist David Ricardo. The collected works also include commentaries on politics and theology, numerous pieces of literary criticism (such as his "specimen of psychological criticism" "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*"), and vivid biographical sketches of the many writers he knew personally, most notably Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Lamb. His most distinctive and impressive achievements, however, are the writings that start with fact and move into macabre fantasy ("On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts") and especially those that begin as quiet autobiography and develop into an elaborate construction made up from the materials of his reveries and dreams (*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, *Autobiographic Sketches*, *Suspiria de Profundis* [*Sighs from the Depths*], and "The English Mail Coach"). In these

achievements De Quincey opened up to English literature the night side of human consciousness, with its grotesque strangeness, its angst, and its pervasive sense of guilt and alienation. "In dreams," he wrote, long before Sigmund Freud, "perhaps under some secret conflict of the midnight sleeper, lighted up to the consciousness at the time, but darkened to the memory as soon as all is finished, each several child of our mysterious race completes for himself the treason of the aboriginal fall." And for these dream writings he developed a mode of organization that is based on thematic statement, variation, and development in the art of music, in which he had a deep and abiding interest. Although by temperament a conservative, De Quincey was in his writings a radical innovator whose experiments look ahead to the materials and methods of later masters in prose and verse such as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot.

# ***From Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*<sup>1</sup>**

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1:  
The *Confessions* were published anonymously in two issues of the *London Magazine*, September and October 1821, and were reprinted as a book in the following year. In 1856 De Quincey revised the book for the collected edition of his writings, expanding it to more than twice its original length. The author was over seventy years old at the time and privately expressed the judgment that the expanded edition lacks the immediacy and artistic economy of the original. The selections here are from the version of the *Confessions* printed in 1822.

The work is divided into three parts. The first part,

[Return to reference 1](#)

## From *Preliminary Confessions*<sup>2</sup>

### [OXFORD STREET AND ANN]

\* \* \* Another person there was at that time, whom I have since sought to trace with far deeper earnestness, and with far deeper sorrow at my failure. This person was a young woman, and one of that unhappy class who subsist upon the wages of prostitution. I feel no shame, nor have any reason to feel it, in avowing, that I was then on familiar and friendly terms with many women in that unfortunate condition. The reader needs neither smile at this avowal, nor frown. For, not to remind my classical readers of the old Latin proverb—"Sine Cerere,"&c.,<sup>3</sup> it may well be supposed that in the existing state of my purse, my connection with such women could not have been an impure one. But the truth is, that at no time of my life have I been a person to hold myself polluted by the touch or approach of any creature that wore a human shape: on the contrary, from my very earliest youth it has been my pride to converse familiarly, *more Socratico*,<sup>4</sup> with all human beings, man, woman, and child, that chance might fling in my way: a practice which is friendly to the knowledge of human nature, to good feelings, and to that frankness of address which becomes a man who would be thought a philosopher. For a philosopher should not see with the eyes of the poor liminary<sup>5</sup> creature, calling himself a man of the world, and filled with narrow and self-regarding prejudices of birth and education, but should look upon himself as a Catholic<sup>6</sup> creature, and as standing in an equal relation to high and low—to educated and uneducated, to the guilty and the innocent. Being myself at that time of necessity a peripatetic, or a walker of the street, I naturally fell in more frequently with those female peripatetics who are technically called street-walkers. Many of these women had occasionally taken my part against watchmen who wished to drive me off the steps of houses where I was sitting. But one amongst them, the one on whose account I have at all

introduced this subject—yet no! let me not class thee, oh noble-minded Ann ——, with that order of women; let me find, if it be possible, some gentler name to designate the condition of her to whose bounty and compassion, ministering to my necessities when all the world had forsaken me, I owe it that I am at this time alive.— For many weeks I had walked at nights with this poor friendless girl up and down Oxford Street, or had rested with her on steps and under the shelter of porticos. She could not be so old as myself: she told me, indeed, that she had not completed her sixteenth year. By such questions as my interest about her prompted, I had gradually drawn forth her simple history. Hers was a case of ordinary occurrence (as I have since had reason to think), and one in which, if London beneficence had better adapted its arrangements to meet it, the power of the law might oftener be interposed to protect, and to avenge. But the stream of London charity flows in a channel which, though deep and mighty, is yet noiseless and underground; not obvious or readily accessible to poor houseless wanderers; and it cannot be denied that the outside air and framework of London society is harsh, cruel, and repulsive. In any case, however, I saw that part of her injuries might easily have been redressed; and I urged her often and earnestly to lay her complaint before a magistrate: friendless as she was, I assured her that she would meet with immediate attention; and that English justice, which was no respecter of persons, would speedily and amply avenge her on the brutal ruffian who had plundered her little property. She promised me often that she would; but she delayed taking the steps I pointed out from time to time: for she was timid and dejected to a degree which showed how deeply sorrow had taken hold of her young heart: and perhaps she thought justly that the most upright judge, and the most righteous tribunals, could do nothing to repair her heaviest wrongs. Something, however, would perhaps have been done: for it had been settled between us at length, but unhappily on the very last time but one that I was ever to see her, that in a day or two we should go together before a magistrate, and that I should speak on her behalf. This little service it was destined, however, that I should never realize. Meantime, that which she rendered to me,



and which was greater than I could ever have repaid her, was this:— One night, when we were pacing slowly along Oxford Street, and after a day when I had felt more than usually ill and faint, I requested her to turn off with me into Soho Square: thither we went; and we sat down on the steps of a house, which, to this hour, I never pass without a pang of grief, and an inner act of homage to the spirit of that unhappy girl, in memory of the noble action which she there performed. Suddenly, as we sat, I grew much worse: I had been leaning my head against her bosom; and all at once I sank from her arms and fell backwards on the steps. From the sensations I then had, I felt an inner conviction of the liveliest kind that without some powerful and reviving stimulus, I should either have died on the spot—or should at least have sunk to a point of exhaustion from which all re-ascent under my friendless circumstances would soon have become hopeless. Then it was, at this crisis of my fate, that my poor orphan companion—who had herself met with little but injuries in this world—stretched out a saving hand to me. Uttering a cry of terror, but without a moment's delay, she ran off into Oxford Street, and in less time than could be imagined, returned to me with a glass of port wine and spices, that acted upon my empty stomach (which at that time would have rejected all solid food) with an instantaneous power of restoration: and for this glass the generous girl without a murmur paid out of her own humble purse at a time—be it remembered!—when she had scarcely wherewithal to purchase the bare necessities of life, and when she could have no reason to expect that I should ever be able to reimburse her.—Oh! youthful benefactress! how often in succeeding years, standing in solitary places, and thinking of thee with grief of heart and perfect love, how often have I wished that, as in ancient times the curse of a father was believed to have a supernatural power, and to pursue its object with a fatal necessity of self-fulfillment—even so the benediction of a heart oppressed with gratitude, might have a like prerogative; might have power given to it from above to chase—to haunt—to waylay<sup>7</sup>—to overtake—to pursue thee into the central darkness of a London brothel, or (if it were possible) into the darkness of the grave—there

to awaken thee with an authentic message of peace and forgiveness, and of final reconciliation!

I do not often weep: for not only do my thoughts on subjects connected with the chief interests of man daily, nay hourly, descend a thousand fathoms “too deep for tears”;<sup>8</sup> not only does the sternness of my habits of thought present an antagonism to the feelings which prompt tears—wanting of necessity to those who, being protected usually by their levity from any tendency to meditative sorrow, would by that same levity be made incapable of resisting it on any casual access of such feelings:—but also, I believe that all minds which have contemplated such objects as deeply as I have done, must, for their own protection from utter despondency, have early encouraged and cherished some tranquilizing belief as to the future balances and the hieroglyphic meanings of human sufferings. On these accounts, I am cheerful to this hour; and, as I have said, I do not often weep. Yet some feelings, though not deeper or more passionate, are more tender than others; and often, when I walk at this time in Oxford Street by dreamy lamplight, and hear those airs played on a barrel-organ<sup>9</sup> which years ago solaced me and my dear companion (as I must always call her), I shed tears, and muse with myself at the mysterious dispensation which so suddenly and so critically separated us for ever.<sup>1</sup> \* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 2: The seventeen-year-old De Quincey had run away from school and, although originally planning to head north from Manchester so as to introduce himself to Wordsworth (whose poetry he worshiped), had ended up taking refuge in London, his whereabouts unknown to his mother and his guardians. He had slept outdoors for two months but has now been permitted, by a disreputable and seedy lawyer, to sleep in an unoccupied, unfurnished, and rat-infested house. There he and a ten-year-old girl, nameless and of uncertain parentage, huddle together for warmth, eking out a famished existence on whatever scraps

he can scavenge from his landlord's frugal breakfast. He goes on to describe his friendship with a young sex worker, Ann.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: *Sine Cerere et Baccho friget Venus*—"without Ceres and Bacchus [food and wine], love grows cold."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the manner of Socrates; that is, by a dialogue of questions and answers.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Limited.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In the sense of "inclusive in tastes and understanding."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: From Wordsworth's "She was a phantom of delight," line 10: "To haunt, to startle, and waylay." De Quincey was an early and enthusiastic admirer of Wordsworth's poetry.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: From the last line of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Instrument played by an organ-grinder.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: De Quincey goes on to narrate that, having been given some money by a family friend who recognized him in the street, he had traveled to Eton to ask a young nobleman whom he knew to stand security for a loan that De Quincey was soliciting from a moneylender. When he returned to London three days later, Ann had disappeared. "If she lived," he writes, "doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps, even within a few feet of each other—a barrier no wider in a London street, often amounting in the end to a separation for eternity!"[Return to reference 1](#)

## From *Introduction to the Pains of Opium*<sup>2</sup>

### [THE MALAY]

\* \* \* I remember, about this time, a little incident, which I mention, because, trifling as it was, the reader will soon meet it again in my dreams, which it influenced more fearfully than could be imagined. One day a Malay<sup>3</sup> knocked at my door. What business a Malay could have to transact amongst English mountains, I cannot conjecture: but possibly he was on his road to a seaport about forty miles distant.

The servant who opened the door to him was a young girl born and bred amongst the mountains, who had never seen an Asiatic dress of any sort: his turban, therefore, confounded her not a little: and, as it turned out that his attainments in English were exactly of the same extent as hers in the Malay, there seemed to be an impassable gulf fixed between all communication of ideas, if either party had happened to possess any. In this dilemma, the girl, recollecting the reputed learning of her master (and, doubtless, giving me credit for a knowledge of all the languages of the earth, besides, perhaps, a few of the lunar ones), came and gave me to understand that there was a sort of demon below, whom she clearly imagined that my art could exorcise from the house. I did not immediately go down: but, when I did, the group which presented itself, arranged as it was by accident, though not very elaborate, took hold of my fancy and my eye in a way that none of the statuesque attitudes exhibited in the ballets at the Opera House, though so ostentatiously complex, had ever done. In a cottage kitchen, but paneled on the wall with dark wood that from age and rubbing resembled oak, and looking more like a rustic hall of entrance than a kitchen, stood the Malay—his turban and loose trousers of dingy white relieved upon the dark paneling:<sup>4</sup> he had placed himself nearer to the girl than she seemed to relish; though her native spirit of mountain intrepidity contended with the feeling of

simple awe which her countenance expressed as she gazed upon the tiger-cat before her. And a more striking picture there could not be imagined, than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite fairness, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, enameled or veneered with mahogany, by marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. Half-hidden by the ferocious-looking Malay, was a little child from a neighboring cottage who had crept in after him, and was now in the act of reverting its head, and gazing upwards at the turban and the fiery eyes beneath it, whilst with one hand he caught at the dress of the young woman for protection. My knowledge of the Oriental tongues is not remarkably extensive, being indeed confined to two words—the Arabic word for barley, and the Turkish for opium (madjoon), which I have learnt from Anastasius.<sup>5</sup> And, as I had neither a Malay dictionary, nor even Adelung's *Mithridates*,<sup>6</sup> which might have helped me to a few words, I addressed him in some lines from the Iliad; considering that, of such languages as I possessed, Greek, in point of longitude, came geographically nearest to an Oriental one. He worshiped<sup>7</sup> me in a most devout manner, and replied in what I suppose was Malay. In this way I saved my reputation with my neighbors: for the Malay had no means of betraying the secret. He lay down upon the floor for about an hour, and then pursued his journey. On his departure, I presented him with a piece of opium. To him, as an Orientalist, I concluded that opium must be familiar: and the expression of his face convinced me that it was. Nevertheless, I was struck with some little consternation when I saw him suddenly raise his hand to his mouth, and (in the schoolboy phrase) bolt the whole, divided into three pieces, at one mouthful. The quantity was enough to kill three dragoons and their horses: and I felt some alarm for the poor creature: but what could be done? I had given him the opium in compassion for his solitary life, on recollecting that if he had traveled on foot from London, it must be nearly three weeks since he could have exchanged a thought with any human being. I could not think of violating the laws of hospitality, by having

him seized and drenched with an emetic, and thus frightening him into a notion that we were going to sacrifice him to some English idol. No: there was clearly no help for it:—he took his leave: and for some days I felt anxious: but as I never heard of any Malay being found dead, I became convinced that he was used<sup>8</sup> to opium: and that I must have done him the service I designed, by giving him one night of respite from the pains of wandering.

This incident I have digressed to mention, because this Malay (partly from the picturesque exhibition he assisted to frame, partly from the anxiety I connected with his image for some days) fastened afterwards upon my dreams, and brought other Malays with him worse than himself, that ran “amuck”<sup>9</sup> at me, and led me into a world of troubles. \* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 2: It is 1816. De Quincey is living at Dove Cottage, Grasmere, and for three years has been addicted to laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol). At this time he has succeeded in reducing his daily dosage from eight thousand to one thousand drops, with a consequent improvement in health and energy.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Native of the Malay peninsula in Southeast Asia.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, his white clothing is cast in relief by the dark paneling.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: *Anastasius, or Memoirs of a Greek*, was a novel published anonymously by Thomas Hope in 1819. It included a description of the physical effects of opium that De Quincey considered to be a “grievous misrepresentation.”[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: *Mithridates, or The Universal Table of Languages*, by the German philologist J. C. Adelung (1732–1806).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Bowed down to.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: This, however, is not a necessary conclusion: the varieties of effect produced by opium on different constitutions are infinite [*De Quincey's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: See the common accounts in any Eastern traveller or voyager of the frantic excesses committed by Malays who have taken opium, or are reduced to desperation by ill luck at gambling [*De Quincey's note*]. "Amuck": also spelled "amok," as a term denoting frenzy, it entered English by way of travel literature and was used initially as a generic designation for inhabitants of the Malay peninsula.[Return to reference 9](#)

## From *The Pains of Opium*

### [OPIUM REVERIES AND DREAMS]

I have thus described and illustrated my intellectual torpor, in terms that apply, more or less, to every part of the four years during which I was under the Circean<sup>1</sup> spells of opium. But for misery and suffering, I might, indeed, be said to have existed in a dormant state. I seldom could prevail on myself to write a letter; an answer of a few words, to any that I received, was the utmost that I could accomplish; and often *that* not until the letter had lain weeks, or even months, on my writing table. Without the aid of M.<sup>2</sup> all records of bills paid, or *to be* paid, must have perished: and my whole domestic economy, whatever became of Political Economy,<sup>3</sup> must have gone into irretrievable confusion.—I shall not afterwards allude to this part of the case: it is one, however, which the opium-eater will find, in the end, as oppressive and tormenting as any other, from the sense of incapacity and feebleness, from the direct embarrassments incident to the neglect or procrastination of each day's appropriate duties, and from the remorse which must often exasperate the stings of these evils to a reflective and conscientious mind. The opium-eater loses none of his moral sensibilities, or aspirations: he wishes and longs, as earnestly as ever, to realize what he believes possible, and feels to be exacted by duty; but his intellectual apprehension of what is possible infinitely outruns his power, not of execution only, but even of power to attempt. He lies under the weight of incubus and nightmare: he lies in sight of all that he would fain perform, just as a man forcibly confined to his bed by the mortal languor of a relaxing disease, who is compelled to witness injury or outrage offered to some object of his tenderest love:—he curses the spells which chain him down from motion:—he would lay down his life if he might get up and walk; but he is powerless as an infant, and cannot even attempt to rise.



I now pass to what is the main subject of these latter confessions, to the history and journal of what took place in my dreams; for these were the immediate and proximate cause of my acutest suffering.

The first notice I had of any important change going on in this part of my physical economy, was from the re-awakening of a state of eye generally incident to childhood, or exalted states of irritability. I know not whether my reader is aware that many children, perhaps most, have a power of painting, as it were, upon the darkness, all sorts of phantoms; in some, that power is simply a mechanic affection of the eye; others have a voluntary, or a semi-voluntary power to dismiss or to summon them; or, as a child once said to me when I questioned him on this matter, "I can tell them to go, and they go; but sometimes they come, when I don't tell them to come." Whereupon I told him that he had almost as unlimited a command over apparitions, as a Roman centurion<sup>4</sup> over his soldiers.—In the middle of 1817, I think it was, that this faculty became positively distressing to me: at night, when I lay awake in bed, vast processions passed along in mournful pomp; friezes of never-ending stories, that to my feelings were as sad and solemn as if they were stories drawn from times before Oedipus or Priam—before Tyre—before Memphis.<sup>5</sup> And, at the same time, a corresponding change took place in my dreams; a theater seemed suddenly opened and lighted up within my brain, which presented nightly spectacles of more than earthly splendor. And the four following facts may be mentioned, as noticeable at this time:

1. That, as the creative state of the eye increased, a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain in one point—that whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams; so that I feared to exercise this faculty; for, as Midas turned all things to gold, that yet baffled his hopes and defrauded his human desires,<sup>6</sup> so whatsoever things capable of being visually represented I did but think of in the darkness, immediately shaped themselves into phantoms of the eye; and, by a

process apparently no less inevitable, when thus once traced in faint and visionary colors, like writings in sympathetic ink,<sup>7</sup> they were drawn out by the fierce chemistry of my dreams, into insufferable splendor that fretted my heart.

2. For this, and all other changes in my dreams, were accompanied by deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy, such as are wholly incommunicable by words. I seemed every night to descend, not metaphorically, but literally to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever reascend. Nor did I, by waking, feel that I *had* re-ascended. This I do not dwell upon; because the state of gloom which attended these gorgeous spectacles, amounting at least to utter darkness, as of some suicidal despondency, cannot be approached by words.

3. The sense of space, and in the end, the sense of time, were both powerfully affected. Buildings, landscapes, &c. were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive. Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity. This, however, did not disturb me so much as the vast expansion of time; I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night; nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience.

4. The minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years, were often revived: I could not be said to recollect them; for if I had been told of them when waking, I should not have been able to acknowledge them as parts of my past experience. But placed as they were before me, in dreams like intuitions, and clothed in all their evanescent circumstances and accompanying feelings, I *recognized* them instantaneously. I was once told by a near relative<sup>8</sup> of mine, that having in her childhood fallen into a river, and being on the very verge of death but for the critical assistance which reached her, she saw in a moment her whole life, in its minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously as in a mirror; and she had a faculty developed as suddenly for comprehending the whole and

every part. This, from some opium experiences of mine, I can believe; I have, indeed, seen the same thing asserted twice in modern books, and accompanied by a remark which I am convinced is true; viz. that the dread book of account, which the Scriptures speak of,<sup>9</sup> is, in fact, the mind itself of each individual. Of this, at least, I feel assured, that there is no such thing as *forgetting* possible to the mind; a thousand accidents may, and will, interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil; but alike, whether veiled or unveiled, the inscription remains forever; just as the stars seem to withdraw before the common light of day, whereas, in fact, we all know that it is the light which is drawn over them as a veil—and that they are waiting to be revealed, when the obscuring daylight shall have withdrawn.

Having noticed these four facts as memorably distinguishing my dreams from those of health, I shall now cite a case illustrative of the first fact; and shall then cite any others that I remember, either in their chronological order, or any other that may give them more effect as pictures to the reader.

I had been in youth, and even since, for occasional amusement, a great reader of Livy,<sup>1</sup> whom, I confess, that I prefer, both for style and matter, to any of the Roman historians; and I had often felt as most solemn and appalling sounds, and most emphatically representative of the majesty of the Roman people, the two words so often occurring in Livy—*Consul Romanus*;<sup>2</sup> especially when the consul is introduced in his military character. I mean to say, that the words king—sultan—regent, &c. or any other titles of those who embody in their own persons the collective majesty of a great people, had less power over my reverential feelings. I had also, though no great reader of history, made myself minutely and critically familiar with one period of English history, viz. the period of the Parliamentary War, having been attracted by the moral grandeur of some who figured in that day, and by the many interesting memoirs which survive those unquiet times. Both these parts of my lighter reading, having furnished me often with matter of reflection,

now furnished me with matter for my dreams. Often I used to see, after painting upon the blank darkness a sort of rehearsal whilst waking, a crowd of ladies, and perhaps a festival, and dances. And I heard it said, or I said to myself, "These are English ladies from the unhappy times of Charles I. These are the wives and the daughters of those who met in peace, and sat at the same tables, and were allied by marriage or by blood; and yet, after a certain day in August, 1642,<sup>3</sup> never smiled upon each other again, nor met but in the field of battle; and at Marston Moor, at Newbury, or at Naseby,<sup>4</sup> cut asunder all ties of love by the cruel saber, and washed away in blood the memory of ancient friendship."—The ladies danced, and looked as lovely as the court of George IV.<sup>5</sup> Yet I knew, even in my dream, that they had been in the grave for nearly two centuries.—This pageant would suddenly dissolve: and at a clapping of hands, would be heard the heart-quaking sound of *Consul Romanus*; and immediately came "sweeping by," in gorgeous paludaments, Paulus or Marius,<sup>6</sup> girt round by a company of centurions, with the crimson tunic hoisted on a spear,<sup>7</sup> and followed by the *alalagmos*<sup>8</sup> of the Roman legions.

Many years ago, when I was looking over Piranesi's Antiquities of Rome, Mr. Coleridge, who was standing by, described to me a set of plates by that artist, called his *Dreams*,<sup>9</sup> and which record the scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever. Some of them (I describe only from memory of Mr. Coleridge's account) represented vast Gothic halls: on the floor of which stood all sorts of engines and machinery, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults, &c. &c. expressive of enormous power put forth, and resistance overcome. Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further, and you perceive it come to a sudden abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose, at least, that his labors must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher:

on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld: and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labors: and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall.—With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams. In the early stage of my malady, the splendors of my dreams were indeed chiefly architectural: and I beheld such pomp of cities and palaces as was never yet beheld by the waking eye, unless in the clouds. From a great modern poet<sup>1</sup> I cite part of a passage which describes, as an appearance actually beheld in the clouds, what in many of its circumstances I saw frequently in sleep:

The appearance, instantaneously disclosed,  
Was of a mighty city—boldly say  
A wilderness of building, sinking far  
And self-withdrawn into a wondrous depth,  
Far sinking into splendor—without end!  
Fabric<sup>2</sup> it seem'd of diamond, and of gold,  
With alabaster domes, and silver spires,  
And blazing terrace upon terrace, high  
Uplifted; here, serene pavilions bright  
In avenues disposed; there towers begirt  
With battlements that on their restless fronts  
Bore stars—illumination of all gems!  
By earthly nature had the effect been wrought  
Upon the dark materials of the storm  
Now pacified: on them, and on the coves,  
And mountain-steeps and summits, whereunto  
The vapors had receded,—taking there  
Their station under a cerulean sky, &c. &c.

The sublime circumstance—"battlements that on their *restless* fronts bore stars"—might have been copied from my architectural dreams, for it often occurred.—We hear it reported of Dryden, and of

Fuseli<sup>3</sup> in modern times, that they thought proper to eat raw meat for the sake of obtaining splendid dreams: how much better for such a purpose to have eaten opium, which yet I do not remember that any poet is recorded to have done, except the dramatist Shadwell:<sup>4</sup> and in ancient days, Homer is, I think, rightly reputed to have known the virtues of opium.<sup>5</sup>

To my architecture succeeded dreams of lakes—and silvery expanses of water:—these haunted me so much, that I feared (though possibly it will appear ludicrous to a medical man) that some dropsical state or tendency of the brain<sup>6</sup> might thus be making itself (to use a metaphysical word) *objective*; and the sentient organ *project* itself as its own object.—For two months I suffered greatly in my head—a part of my bodily structure which had hitherto been so clear from all touch or taint of weakness (physically, I mean), that I used to say of it, as the last Lord Orford<sup>7</sup> said of his stomach, that it seemed likely to survive the rest of my person.—Till now I had never felt a headache even, or any the slightest pain, except rheumatic pains caused by my own folly. However, I got over this attack, though it must have been verging on something very dangerous.

The waters now changed their character—from translucent lakes, shining like mirrors, they now became seas and oceans. And now came a tremendous change, which, unfolding itself slowly like a scroll, through many months, promised an abiding torment; and, in fact, it never left me until the winding up of my case. Hitherto the human face had mixed often in my dreams, but not despotically, nor with any special power of tormenting. But now that which I have called the tyranny of the human face began to unfold itself. Perhaps some part of my London life might be answerable for this. Be that as it may, now it was that upon the rocking waters of the ocean the human face began to appear: the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens: faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries:—my agitation was infinite,—my mind tossed—and surged with the ocean.<sup>8</sup>



May 1818

The Malay has been a fearful enemy for months. I have been every night, through his means, transported into Asiatic scenes. I know not whether others share in my feelings on this point; but I have often thought that if I were compelled to forego England, and to live in China, and among Chinese manners and modes of life and scenery, I should go mad. The causes of my horror lie deep; and some of them must be common to others. Southern Asia, in general, is the seat of awful images and associations. As the cradle of the human race, it would alone have a dim and reverential feeling connected with it. But there are other reasons. No man can pretend that the wild, barbarous, and capricious superstitions of Africa, or of savage tribes elsewhere, affect him in the way that he is affected by the ancient, monumental, cruel, and elaborate religions of Indostan, &c. The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, modes of faith, &c. is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man<sup>9</sup> renewed. Even Englishmen, though not bred in any knowledge of such institutions, cannot but shudder at the mystic sublimity of *castes*<sup>1</sup> that have flowed apart, and refused to mix, through such immemorial tracts of time; nor can any man fail to be awed by the names of the Ganges, or the Euphrates. It contributes much to these feelings, that southern Asia is, and has been for thousands of years, the part of the earth most swarming with human life; the great *officina gentium*.<sup>2</sup> Man is a weed in those regions. The vast empires also, into which the enormous population of Asia has always been cast, give a further sublimity to the feelings associated with all Oriental names or images. In China, over and above what it has in common with the rest of southern Asia, I am terrified by the modes of life, by the manners, and the barrier of utter abhorrence, and want of sympathy, placed between us by feelings deeper than I can analyze. I could sooner live with lunatics, or brute animals. All this, and much more than I can say, or have time to say, the reader must enter into

before he can comprehend the unimaginable horror which these dreams of Oriental imagery, and mythological tortures, impressed upon me. Under the connecting feeling of tropical heat and vertical sunlights, I brought together all creatures, birds, beasts, reptiles, all trees and plants, usages and appearances, that are found in all tropical regions, and assembled them together in China or Indostan. From kindred feelings, I soon brought Egypt and all her gods under the same law. I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by paroquets, by cockatoos. I ran into pagodas: and was fixed, for centuries, at the summit, or in secret rooms; I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshiped; I was sacrificed. I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva<sup>3</sup> laid wait for me. I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile<sup>4</sup> trembled at. I was buried, for a thousand years, in stone coffins, with mummies and sphinxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids. I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud.

I thus give the reader some slight abstraction of my Oriental dreams,<sup>5</sup> which always filled me with such amazement at the monstrous scenery, that horror seemed absorbed, for a while, in sheer astonishment. Sooner or later, came a reflux of feeling that swallowed up the astonishment, and left me, not so much in terror, as in hatred and abomination of what I saw. Over every form, and threat, and punishment, and dim sightless incarceration, brooded a sense of eternity and infinity that drove me into an oppression as of madness. Into these dreams only, it was, with one or two slight exceptions, that any circumstances of physical horror entered. All before had been moral and spiritual terrors. But here the main agents were ugly birds, or snakes, or crocodiles; especially the last. The cursed crocodile became to me the object of more horror than almost all the rest. I was compelled to live with him; and (as was always the case almost in my dreams) for centuries. I escaped sometimes, and found myself in Chinese houses, with cane tables,



&c. All the feet of the tables, sofas, &c. soon became instinct with life: the abominable head of the crocodile, and his leering eyes, looked out at me, multiplied into a thousand repetitions: and I stood loathing and fascinated. And so often did this hideous reptile haunt my dreams, that many times the very same dream was broken up in the very same way: I heard gentle voices speaking to me (I hear every thing when I am sleeping); and instantly I awoke: it was broad noon; and my children were standing, hand in hand, at my bedside; come to show me their colored shoes, or new frocks, or to let me see them dressed for going out. I protest that so awful was the transition from the damned crocodile, and the other unutterable monsters and abortions of my dreams, to the sight of innocent *human* natures and of infancy, that, in the mighty and sudden revulsion of mind, I wept, and could not forbear it, as I kissed their faces.

June 1819

I have had occasion to remark, at various periods of my life, that the deaths of those whom we love, and indeed the contemplation of death generally, is (*ceteris paribus*)<sup>6</sup> more affecting in summer than in any other season of the year. And the reasons are these three, I think: first, that the visible heavens in summer appear far higher, more distant, and (if such a solecism may be excused) more infinite; the clouds, by which chiefly the eye expounds the distance of the blue pavilion stretched over our heads, are in summer more voluminous, massed, and accumulated in far grander and more towering piles: secondly, the light and the appearances of the declining and the setting sun are much more fitted to be types and characters of the Infinite: and, thirdly (which is the main reason), the exuberant and riotous prodigality of life naturally forces the mind more powerfully upon the antagonist thought of death, and the wintry sterility of the grave. For it may be observed, generally, that wherever two thoughts stand related to each other by a law of antagonism, and exist, as it were, by mutual repulsion, they are apt to suggest each other. On these accounts it is that I find it

impossible to banish the thought of death when I am walking alone in the endless days of summer; and any particular death, if not more affecting, at least haunts my mind more obstinately and besiegingly in that season. Perhaps this cause, and a slight incident which I omit, might have been the immediate occasions of the following dream; to which, however, a predisposition must always have existed in my mind; but having been once roused, it never left me, and split into a thousand fantastic varieties, which often suddenly reunited, and composed again the original dream.

I thought that it was a Sunday morning in May, that it was Easter Sunday, and as yet very early in the morning. I was standing, as it seemed to me, at the door of my own cottage. Right before me lay the very scene which could really be commanded from that situation, but exalted, as was usual, and solemnized by the power of dreams. There were the same mountains, and the same lovely valley at their feet; but the mountains were raised to more than Alpine height, and there was interspace far larger between them of meadows and forest lawns; the hedges were rich with white roses; and no living creature was to be seen, excepting that in the green churchyard there were cattle tranquilly reposing upon the verdant graves, and particularly round about the grave of a child whom I had tenderly loved,<sup>7</sup> just as I had really beheld them, a little before sunrise in the same summer, when that child died. I gazed upon the well-known scene, and I said aloud (as I thought) to myself, "It yet wants much of sunrise; and it is Easter Sunday; and that is the day on which they celebrate the first-fruits of resurrection. I will walk abroad; old griefs shall be forgotten today; for the air is cool and still, and the hills are high, and stretch away to heaven; and the forest-glades are as quiet as the churchyard; and, with the dew, I can wash the fever from my forehead, and then I shall be unhappy no longer." And I turned, as if to open my garden gate; and immediately I saw upon the left a scene far different; but which yet the power of dreams had reconciled into harmony with the other. The scene was an Oriental one; and there also it was Easter Sunday, and very early in the morning. And at a vast distance were visible, as a stain upon the

horizon, the domes and cupolas of a great city—an image or faint abstraction, caught perhaps in childhood from some picture of Jerusalem. And not a bow-shot from me, upon a stone, and shaded by Judean palms, there sat a woman; and I looked; and it was—Ann! She fixed her eyes upon me earnestly; and I said to her at length: “So then I have found you at last.” I waited: but she answered me not a word. Her face was the same as when I saw it last, and yet again how different! Seventeen years ago, when the lamplight fell upon her face, as for the last time I kissed her lips (lips, Ann, that to me were not polluted), her eyes were streaming with tears: the tears were now wiped away; she seemed more beautiful than she was at that time, but in all other points the same, and not older. Her looks were tranquil, but with unusual solemnity of expression; and I now gazed upon her with some awe, but suddenly her countenance grew dim, and, turning to the mountains, I perceived vapors rolling between us; in a moment, all had vanished; thick darkness came on; and, in the twinkling of an eye, I was far away from mountains, and by lamplight in Oxford Street, walking again with Ann—just as we walked seventeen years before, when we were both children.

As a final specimen, I cite one of a different character, from 1820.

The dream commenced with a music which now I often heard in dreams—a music of preparation and of awakening suspense; a music like the opening of the Coronation Anthem,<sup>8</sup> and which, like *that*, gave the feeling of a vast march—of infinite cavalcades filing off—and the tread of innumerable armies. The morning was come of a mighty day—a day of crisis and of final hope for human nature, then suffering some mysterious eclipse, and laboring in some dread extremity. Somewhere, I knew not where—somehow, I knew not how—by some beings, I knew not whom—a battle, a strife, an agony, was conducting—was evolving like a great drama, or piece of music; with which my sympathy was the more insupportable from my confusion as to its place, its cause, its nature, and its possible issue. I, as is usual in dreams (where, of necessity, we make

ourselves central to every movement), had the power, and yet had not the power, to decide it. I had the power, if I could raise myself, to will it; and yet again had not the power, for the weight of twenty Atlantics was upon me, or the oppression of inexpiable guilt.

“Deeper than ever plummet sounded,”<sup>9</sup> I lay inactive. Then, like a chorus, the passion deepened. Some greater interest was at stake; some mightier cause than ever yet the sword had pleaded, or trumpet had proclaimed. Then came sudden alarms: hurryings to and fro: trepidations of innumerable fugitives, I knew not whether from the good cause or the bad: darkness and lights: tempest and human faces: and at last, with the sense that all was lost, female forms, and the features that were worth all the world to me, and but a moment allowed—and clasped hands, and heart-breaking partings, and then—everlasting farewells! and with a sigh, such as the caves of hell sighed when the incestuous mother uttered the abhorred name of death,<sup>1</sup> the sound was reverberated—everlasting farewells! and again, and yet again reverberated—everlasting farewells!

And I awoke in struggles, and cried aloud—“I will sleep no more!”<sup>2</sup>

1821

1821

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Like those of Circe, the enchantress in the *Odyssey* who turned Odysseus’s men into swine.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Margaret Simpson, whom De Quincey had married in 1817.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Inspired by David Ricardo’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1817), De Quincey had begun to write, but never completed, a work he called *Prolegomena to All Future Systems of Political Economy*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A Roman officer commanding a troop of a hundred soldiers (a “century”).[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: De Quincey is calling the roll of great civilizations in the past. Oedipus was the king of Thebes. Priam was the king of Troy. Tyre was the chief city of Phoenicia. Memphis was the capital of ancient Egypt.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: When granted his rash wish that all he touched should turn to gold, King Midas was horrified to discover that his food, drink, and beloved daughter all became gold at his touch.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Invisible ink.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: According to family report De Quincey's mother.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The book listing everyone's name at the Last Judgment (Revelation 20:12).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Titus Livius (59 B.C.E.–17 C.E.), author of a history of Rome in 142 books.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Roman consul (Latin); one of two officials, elected annually, who wielded the chief military and judicial authority in Republican Rome.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The raising of the king's banner on Castle Hill, Nottingham, on August 22, 1642, signaled the beginning of the English Civil Wars.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Scenes of the defeat of King Charles's forces in the Civil Wars.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The reigning monarch at the time De Quincey was writing.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Lucius Paulus (d. 160 B.C.E.) and Caius Marius (d. 86 B.C.E.) were Roman generals who won famous victories. "Paludaments": the cloaks worn by Roman generals.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The signal which announced a day of battle [*De Quincey's note in the revised edition*].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A word expressing collectively the gathering of the Roman war-cries [*De Quincey's note in the revised edition*]. The word is Greek.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Giovanni Piranesi (1720–1778), a Venetian especially famed for his many etchings of ancient and modern Rome. He

did not publish prints called *Dreams*; De Quincey doubtless refers to his series called *Carceri d'Invenzione*, "Imaginary Prisons." The description that De Quincey recalls from Coleridge's conversation is remarkably apt for these terrifying architectural fantasies.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: The quotation is from Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, book 2, lines 834ff. It describes a cloud structure after a storm.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, building.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: John Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) was born in Switzerland and painted in England. He was noted for his paintings of nightmarish fantasies.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Thomas Shadwell was a Restoration dramatist and poet. He is now better known as the target of Dryden's satire (in *Mac Flecknoe* and elsewhere) than as a writer in his own right.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In the *Odyssey*, book 4, Homer praises nepenthe (which is probably opium) as a "drug to heal all pain and anger, and bring forgetfulness of every sorrow."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: De Quincey's sister Elizabeth died at age nine of hydrocephalus, water on the brain. "Dropsical": afflicted with dropsy—an accumulation of fluid in the bodily tissues and cavities.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Horace Walpole, 18th-century wit and letter writer, author of the Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Compare De Quincey's earlier description of his repeated hunts through the London streets for his friend Ann: "I suppose that, in the literal and unrhetorical use of the word *myriad*, I may say that on my different visits to London, I have looked into many, many myriads of female faces, in the hope of meeting her."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A person who lived in the time before the great flood described in Genesis.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The reference is to the Hindu caste system of India, with its sharp divisions between four hereditary social

- classes.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Manufactory of populations (Latin).[Return to reference 2](#)
  - Note 3: Among the Hindu deities Brahma is the creative aspect of divine reality, Vishnu is its maintainer, and Shiva its destroyer.[Return to reference 3](#)
  - Note 4: The ibis (a long-legged wading bird) and the crocodile were considered sacred in ancient Egypt. Isis was the ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility. She was the sister and wife of Osiris, whose annual death and rebirth represented the seasonal cycle of nature.[Return to reference 4](#)
  - Note 5: For a discussion of the cultural context of De Quincey's "Oriental dreams," see "The Romantic Imagination and the 'Oriental Nations,'" p. 918 in this volume.[Return to reference 5](#)
  - Note 6: Other things being the same (Latin).[Return to reference 6](#)
  - Note 7: The child is Wordsworth's daughter Catherine, who died at the age of four. She is the subject of Wordsworth's sonnet "Surprised by joy."[Return to reference 7](#)
  - Note 8: Composed by George Frideric Handel for the coronation of George II in 1727.[Return to reference 8](#)
  - Note 9: In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* guilt-ridden King Alonso, believing that his son has drowned, says he will "seek him deeper then e'er plummet sounded / And with him there lie mudded" (3.3.101–02).[Return to reference 9](#)
  - Note 1: The reference is to *Paradise Lost*, book 2, lines 777ff. The "incestuous mother" is Sin, who is doubly incestuous: she is the daughter of Satan, who begot Death upon her, and she was in turn raped by her son and gave birth to a pack of "yelling Monsters."[Return to reference 1](#)
  - Note 2: Macbeth says: "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more, / Macbeth does murder sleep' " (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 2.2.33–34).[Return to reference 2](#)



# GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON

## 1788–1824

In his *History of English Literature*, written in the late 1850s, the French critic Hippolyte Taine gave only a few condescending pages to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Shelley, and Keats and then devoted a long chapter to Lord Byron, “the greatest and most English of these artists; he is so great and so English that from him alone we shall learn more truths of his country and of his age than from all the rest together.” This comment reflects the fact that Byron had achieved an immense European reputation during his own lifetime, while admirers of his English contemporaries were much more limited in number. Through much of the nineteenth century he continued to be rated as one of the greatest of English poets and the very prototype of literary Romanticism. His influence was manifested everywhere, among the major poets and novelists (Balzac and Stendhal in France, Pushkin and Dostoyevsky in Russia, and Melville in America), painters (especially Delacroix), and composers (including Beethoven and Berlioz).

Yet even as poets, painters, and composers across Europe and the Americas struck Byronic attitudes, Byron’s place within the canon of English Romantic poetry was becoming insecure. The same Victorian critics who first described the Romantic period *as* a literary period warned readers against the immorality of Byron’s poetry, finding in his voluptuous imagination and aristocratic disdain for the commonplace an affront to their own, middle-class values: “Close



thy Byron; open thy Goethe," Thomas Carlyle urged in *Sartor Resartus* (1834), meaning to redirect the nation toward healthier reading matter. After getting a glimpse of the scandalous stuff recorded in Byron's journals, Felicia Hemans ceased to wear the brooch in which she had preserved a lock of the poet's hair: she could venerate him no longer. Indeed, Byron would have had qualms about being considered a representative figure of a period that also included Wordsworth (memorialized in Byron's *Don Juan* as "Wordy") or Keats (a shabby Cockney brat, Byron claimed) or scribbling women such as Hemans. These reservations were reciprocated. Of Byron's best-known male contemporaries, only Shelley thought highly of either the man or his work (although there are signs that, among the naysayers, the negative reactions were tinged with some resentment at Byron's success in developing a style that spoke to a popular audience). Byron in fact insisted that, measured against the poetic practice of Alexander Pope, he and his contemporaries were "all in the wrong, one as much as another. . . . We are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system, or systems, not worth a damn in itself." Pope's Horatian satires, along with Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, exerted a significant influence on the style that Byron developed for his epic survey of modern folly, *Don Juan*.

Still, even as he had recourse to old-fashioned eighteenth-century models, Byron cultivated a skepticism about established systems of belief that, in its restlessness and defiance, expressed the intellectual and social ferment of his era. And through much of his best poetry, he shared his contemporaries' fascination with the internal dramas of the individual mind (although Byron explored personality in an improvisatory and mercurial manner that could not have been more different from Wordsworth's autobiographical accounts of his psychological development). Readers marveled over the intensity of the feelings his verse communicated—"its force, fire, and thought," said the novelist Sydney Owenson—and the vividness of the sense of self they found in it. Byron's chief claim to be considered an arch-Romantic is that he provided the age with what Taine called its "ruling personage; that is, the model that

contemporaries invest with their admiration and sympathy." This personage is the "Byronic hero." He is first sketched in the opening canto of *Childe Harold*, then recurs in various guises in the verse romances and dramas that followed. In his developed form, as we find it in *Manfred*, he is an alien, mysterious, and gloomy spirit, superior in his passions and powers to the common run of humanity, whom he regards with disdain. He harbors the torturing memory of an enormous, nameless guilt that drives him toward an inevitable doom. And he exerts an attraction on other characters that is the more compelling because it involves their terror at his obliviousness to ordinary human concerns and values. This figure, infusing the archrebel in a nonpolitical form with a strong erotic interest, was imitated in life as well as in art and helped shape the intellectual and the cultural history of the later nineteenth century. The literary descendants of the Byronic hero include Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and the hero of Pushkin's great poem *Eugene Onegin*. Byron also lived on in the guise of the Undead, thanks to the success of a novella by his former friend and traveling companion John Polidori, whose "The Vampyre" (1819) mischievously made Byron its model for the title character. Earlier Byron had in his writings helped introduce the English to the eastern Mediterranean's legends of bloodsucking evil spirits; it was left to Polidori, however, to portray the vampire as a habitu   of England's most fashionable social circles. The fact that, for all their menace, vampires—from Bela Lugosi's Count Dracula to Anne Rice's L'Estat—remain models of well-dressed, aristocratic elegance represents yet another tribute to the staying power of Byron's image.

Byron's contemporaries insisted on identifying the author with his fictional characters, reading his writing as veiled autobiography even when it dealt with supernatural themes. (They also read other people's writing this way: to Polidori's chagrin, authorship of "The Vampyre" was attributed to Byron.) Byron's letters and the testimony of his friends show, however, that, except for recurrent moods of deep depression, his own temperament was in many respects opposite to that of his heroes. While he was passionate and willful,

he was also a witty conversationalist capable of taking an ironic attitude toward his own activities as well as those of others. But although Byronism was largely a fiction, produced by a collaboration between Byron's imagination and that of his public, the fiction was historically more important than the actual person.

Byron was descended from two aristocratic families, both of them colorful, violent, and dissolute. His grandfather was an admiral nicknamed "Foulweather Jack"; his great-uncle was the fifth Baron Byron, known to his rural neighbors as the "Wicked Lord," who was tried by his peers for killing his kinsman William Chaworth in a drunken duel; his father, Captain John Byron, was a rake and fortune hunter who rapidly spent his way through the fortunes of two wealthy wives. Byron's mother was a Scotswoman, Catherine Gordon of Gight, the last descendant of a line of lawless Scottish lairds. After her husband died (Byron was then three), she brought up her son in near poverty in Aberdeen, where he was indoctrinated with the Calvinistic morality of Scottish Presbyterianism. Catherine Byron was an ill-educated and extremely irascible woman who nevertheless had an abiding love for her son; they fought violently when together, but corresponded affectionately enough when apart, until her death in 1811.

When Byron was ten the death of his great-uncle, preceded by that of more immediate heirs to the title, made him the sixth Lord Byron. In a fashion suitable to his new status, he was sent to Harrow School, then to Trinity College, Cambridge. He had a deformed foot, made worse by inept surgical treatment, about which he felt acute embarrassment. His lameness made him avid for athletic prowess; he played cricket and made himself an expert boxer, fencer, and horseman and a powerful swimmer. Both at Cambridge and at his ancestral estate of Newstead, he engaged with more than ordinary zeal in the expensive pursuits and fashionable dissipations of a young Regency lord. As a result, despite a sizable and increasing income, he got into financial difficulties from which he did not entirely extricate himself until late in his life. In the course of his schooling, he formed many close and devoted friendships, the

most important with John Cam Hobhouse, a sturdy political liberal and commonsense moralist who exerted a steadying influence throughout Byron's turbulent life.

Despite his distractions at the university, Byron found time to try his hand at lyric verse, some of which was published in 1807 in a slim and conventional volume titled *Hours of Idleness*. This was treated so harshly by the *Edinburgh Review* that Byron was provoked to write in reply his first important poem, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, a vigorous satire in which he incorporated brilliant ridicule (whose tactlessness he later came to regret) of important contemporaries, including Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the *Edinburgh* critics.

After attaining his M.A. degree and his legal independence from his guardians, Byron set out with Hobhouse in 1809 on a tour through Portugal and Spain to Malta, and then to little-known Albania, Greece, and Asia Minor. There, in the classic locale for Greek love, he encountered a culture that accepted sexual relations between older aristocratic men and beautiful boys, and he accumulated materials that, sometimes rather slyly, he incorporated into many of his important poems, including his last work, *Don Juan*. The first literary product was *Childe Harold*; he wrote the opening two cantos while on the tour that the poem describes; published them in 1812 soon after his return to England; and, in his own oft-quoted phrase, "awoke one morning and found myself famous." He became the celebrity of fashionable London and increased his literary success with a series of highly readable Eastern tales; in these the Byronic hero, represented against various exotic backdrops as a "Giaour" (an "infidel" within Muslim society), or a "Corsair" (a pirate), or in other forms, flaunts his misanthropy and undergoes violent and romantic adventures that current gossip attributed to the author. In his chronic shortage of money, Byron could well have used the huge income from these publications, but instead maintained his status as an aristocratic amateur by giving the royalties away. Occupying his inherited seat in the House of Lords, he also became briefly active on the liberal side of the Whig Party and spoke

courageously in defense of the Nottingham weavers who had resorted to smashing the newly invented textile machines that had thrown them out of work. He also supported other liberal measures, including that of Catholic Emancipation.

Byron was extraordinarily handsome—"so beautiful a countenance," Coleridge wrote, "I scarcely ever saw . . . his eyes the open portals of the sun—things of light, and for light." Because of a constitutional tendency to obesity, however, he was able to maintain his looks only by resorting again and again to a starvation diet of biscuits, soda water, and strong purgatives. Often as a result of female initiative rather than his own, Byron entered into a sequence of liaisons with ladies of fashion. One of these, the flamboyant and eccentric young Lady Caroline Lamb, caused him so much distress by her pursuit that Byron turned for relief to marriage with Annabella Milbanke, who was in every way Lady Caroline's opposite, for she was unworldly and intellectual (with a special passion for mathematics) and naively believed that she could reform her husband. This ill-starred marriage produced a daughter (Augusta Ada) and many scenes in which Byron, goaded by financial difficulties, behaved so frantically that his wife questioned his sanity; after only one year the union ended in a legal separation. The final blow came when Lady Byron discovered her husband's incestuous relations with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh. The two had been raised apart, so that they were almost strangers when they met as adults. Byron's affection for his sister, however guilty, was genuine and endured all through his life. This affair, enhanced by rumors about Byron's earlier liaisons with men, proved a delicious morsel even to the jaded palate of a public that was used to eating up stories of aristocratic vice. Byron was ostracized by all but a few friends and was finally forced to leave England forever on April 25, 1816.

Byron now resumed the travels incorporated in the third and fourth cantos of *Childe Harold*. At Geneva he lived for several months in close and intellectually fruitful relation to Percy and Mary Shelley, who were accompanied by Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont—a misguided seventeen-year-old who had had an affair with Byron

while he was still in England and who in January 1817 bore him a daughter, Allegra. In the fall of 1817, Byron established himself in Venice, where he began a year and a half of debauchery that, he estimated, involved liaisons with more than two hundred women. This period, however, was also one of great literary creativity. Often working through the night, he finished his tragedy *Manfred*; wrote the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*; and then, feeling more and more trapped by the poetic modes that had won him his popularity, tested out an entirely new mode in *Beppo: A Venetian Story*, a comic verse tale about a deceived husband in which he previewed the playful narrative manner and the ottava rima stanzas of *Don Juan*. In December 1818 he began the composition of *Don Juan*.

Exhausted and bored by promiscuity, Byron in 1819 settled into a placid and relatively faithful relationship with Teresa Guiccioli, the young wife of the elderly Count Alessandro Guiccioli; according to the Italian upper-class mores of the times, having contracted a marriage of convenience, she could now with some propriety take Byron as her lover. Through the countess's nationalistic family, the Gambas, Byron became involved with a group of political conspirators seeking to end the Austrian Empire's control over northern Italy. When the Gambas were forced by the authorities to move to Pisa, Byron followed them there and, for the second time, joined the Shelleys. There grew up about them the "Pisan Circle," which in addition to the Gambas included their friends Thomas Medwin and Edward and Jane Williams, as well as the Greek nationalist leader Prince Mavrocordatos, the picturesque Irish Count Taaffe, and the adventurer Edward Trelawny, a great teller of tall tales who seems to have stepped out of one of Byron's romances. Leigh Hunt, the journalist and essayist, joined them, drawing Byron and Percy Shelley into his plan to make Italy the base for a radical political journal, *The Liberal*. This circle was gradually broken up, however, first by the Shelleys' anger over Byron's treatment of his daughter Allegra (Byron had sent the child to be brought up as a Catholic in an Italian convent, where she died of a fever in 1822); then by the expulsion of the Gambas, whom Byron followed to

Genoa; and finally by the drowning of Percy Shelley and Edward Williams in July 1822.

Byron meanwhile had been steadily at work on a series of closet tragedies—plays, in Byron's words, "expressly written *not* for the theatre"—(including *Cain*, *Sardanapalus*, and *Marino Faliero*) and on his devastating satire on the life and death of George III, *The Vision of Judgment*. But increasingly he devoted himself to the continuation of *Don Juan*. He had always been diffident in his self-judgments and easily swayed by literary advice. But now, confident that he had at last found his true gifts as a poet, he kept on, in spite of persistent objections against the supposed immorality of the poem by the English public, by his publisher John Murray, by his friends and well-wishers, and by his extremely decorous lover, the Countess Guiccioli—by almost everyone, in fact, except the idealist Shelley, who thought *Juan* incomparably better than anything he himself could write and insisted "that every word of it is pregnant with immortality."

Byron finally broke off literature for action when he organized an expedition to assist in the Greek war for independence from the Ottoman Empire. He knew too well the conditions in Greece, and had too skeptical an estimate of human nature, to entertain hope of success; but, in part because his own writings had helped kindle European enthusiasm for the Greek cause, he now felt honor-bound to try what could be done. In the dismal, marshy town of Missolonghi, he lived a Spartan existence, training troops whom he had subsidized and exhibiting practical grasp and a power of leadership amid a chaos of factionalism, intrigue, and military ineptitude. Worn out, he succumbed to a series of feverish attacks and died just after he had reached his thirty-sixth birthday. To this day Byron is revered by the Greek people as a national hero.

Students of Byron still feel, as his friends had felt, the magnetism of his volatile temperament. As Mary Shelley wrote six years after his death, when she read Thomas Moore's edition of his *Letters and Journals*: "The Lord Byron I find there is our Lord Byron—the fascinating—faulty—childish—philosophical being—daring the world

—docile to a private circle—impetuous and indolent—gloomy and yet more gay than any other.” Of his contradictions Byron was well aware; he told his friend Lady Blessington: “I am so changeable, being everything by turns and nothing long—I am such a strange *mélange* of good and evil, that it would be difficult to describe me.” Yet he remained faithful to his code: a determination to tell the truth as he saw it about the world and about himself (his refusal to suppress or conceal any of his moods is in part what made him seem so contradictory) and a dedication to the freedom of nations and individuals. As he went on to say to Lady Blessington: “There are but two sentiments to which I am constant—a strong love of liberty, and a detestation of cant.”

The texts printed here are from *Byron's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Alice Levine.



# Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos<sup>1</sup>

*May 9, 1810*

## **1**

If, in the month of dark December,  
Leander, who was nightly wont  
(What maid will not the tale remember?)  
To cross thy stream, broad Hellespont!

## **2**

5 If, when the wintry tempest roar'd,  
He sped to Hero, nothing loth,  
And thus of old thy current pour'd,  
Fair Venus! how I pity both!

## **3**

10 For *me*, degenerate modern wretch,  
Though in the genial month of May,  
My dripping limbs I faintly stretch,  
And think I've done a feat to-day.

## **4**

15 But since he cross'd the rapid tide,  
According to the doubtful story,  
To woo,—and—Lord knows what beside,  
And swam for Love, as I for Glory;

'Twere hard to say who fared the best:  
 Sad mortals! thus the Gods still plague you!  
 He lost his labour, I my jest:  
 For he was drown'd, and I've the ague.

1810      20

1812

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The Hellespont (now called the Dardanelles) is the narrow strait between Europe and Asia. In the ancient story, retold in Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, young Leander of Abydos, on the Asian side, swam nightly to visit Hero, a priestess of the goddess Venus at Sestos, until he was drowned when he made the attempt in a storm. Byron and a young Lieutenant Ekenhead swam the Hellespont in the reverse direction on May 3, 1810. Byron alternated between complacency and humor in his many references to the event. In a note to the poem, he mentions that the distance was "upwards of four English miles, though the actual breadth is barely one. The rapidity of the current is such that no boat can row directly across. . . . The water was extremely cold, from the melting of the mountain snows." [Return to reference 1](#)

# She Walks in Beauty<sup>1</sup>

## 1

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:  
5 Thus mellow'd to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

## 2

One shade the more, one ray the less,  
Had half impair'd the nameless grace  
Which waves in every raven tress,  
10 Or softly lightens o'er her face;  
Where thoughts serenely sweet express  
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

## 3

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,  
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,  
15 The smiles that win, the tints that glow,  
But tell of days in goodness spent,  
A mind at peace with all below,  
A heart whose love is innocent!

June 1814

1815

## Endnotes

- Note 1: From *Hebrew Melodies* (1815), a collection of lyrics on Old Testament themes that Byron composed to accompany the musician Isaac Nathan's settings of traditional synagogue chants. Byron wrote these lines about his beautiful cousin by marriage, Anne Wilmot, who at the ball where they first met wore a black mourning gown brightened with spangles. In their context as the opening poem of *Hebrew Melodies*, the lines praise any one of a number of Old Testament heroines.[Return to reference 1](#)

# Darkness<sup>1</sup>

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.  
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars  
Did wander darkling<sup>o</sup> in the eternal space,  
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth  
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;  
5 Morn came and went—and came, and brought no  
day,  
And men forgot their passions in the dread  
Of this their desolation; and all hearts  
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:  
And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,  
10 The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,  
The habitations of all things which dwell,  
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consumed,  
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes  
To look once more into each other's face;  
15 Happy were those who dwelt within the eye  
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:  
A fearful hope was all the world contain'd;  
Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour  
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks  
20 Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.  
The brows of men by the despairing light  
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits  
The flashes fell upon them; some lay down  
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest  
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smiled;  
25 And others hurried to and fro, and fed  
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up  
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,  
The pall of a past world; and then again

30 With curses cast them down upon the dust,  
And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds  
shriek'd,  
And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,  
And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes  
35 Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd  
And twined themselves among the multitude,  
Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food:  
And War, which for a moment was no more,  
Did glut himself again;—a meal was bought  
40 With blood, and each sate sullenly apart  
Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;  
All earth was but one thought—and that was death,  
Immediate and inglorious; and the pang  
Of famine fed upon all entrails—men  
45 Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;  
The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,  
Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,  
And he was faithful to a corse, and kept  
The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,  
50 Till hunger clung<sup>o</sup> them, or the dropping dead  
Lured their lank jaws; himself sought out no food,  
But with a piteous and perpetual moan,  
And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand  
Which answer'd not with a caress—he died.  
The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two  
55 Of an enormous city did survive,  
And they were enemies; they met beside  
The dying embers of an altar-place  
Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things  
For an unholy usage; they raked up,  
60 And shivering scraped with their cold skeleton hands  
The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath  
Blew for a little life, and made a flame  
Which was a mockery; then they lifted up  
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld

65 Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—  
 Even of their mutual hideousness they died,  
 Unknowing who he was upon whose brow  
 Famine had written Fiend. The world was void,  
 70 The populous and the powerful—was a lump,  
 Seasonless, herbless, ° treeless, manless, lifeless—  
 A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.  
 The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,  
 And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;  
 Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,  
 75 And their masts fell down piecemeal; as they dropp'd  
 They slept on the abyss without a surge—  
 The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,  
 The moon, their mistress, had expired before;  
 The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,  
 80 And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need  
 Of aid from them—She was the Universe.

Diodati, July, 1816

## Endnotes

1816

- Note 1: A powerful blank-verse description of the end of life on earth. New geological sciences and an accompanying interest in what the fossil record indicated about the extinction of species made such speculations hardly less common in Byron's time than in ours. Mary Shelley would later take up the theme in her novel *The Last Man* (1826; see p. 1022, below). [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *in the dark* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *withered* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *without vegetation* [Return to reference °](#)

# So we'll go no more a roving<sup>1</sup>

So we'll go no more a roving  
    So late into the night,  
Though the heart be still as loving,  
    And the moon be still as bright.

5     For the sword outwears its sheath,  
        And the soul wears out the breast,  
And the heart must pause to breathe,  
    And Love itself have rest.

10    Though the night was made for loving,  
        And the day returns too soon,  
Yet we'll go no more a roving  
        By the light of the moon.

1817

1830

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Composed in the Lenten aftermath of a period of late-night carousing during the Carnival season in Venice, and included in a letter to Thomas Moore, February 28, 1817. Byron wrote, "I find 'the sword wearing out the scabbard,' though I have but just turned the corner of twenty-nine." The poem is based on the refrain of a bawdy Scottish song, "The Jolly Beggar": "And we'll gang nae mair a roving / Sae late into the nicht." [Return to reference 1](#)



# ***From Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt*<sup>1</sup>**

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1: A romance or narrative of adventure. [Return to reference 1](#)

## From *Canto the First*

### ["SIN'S LONG LABYRINTH"]

#### 1

Oh, thou! in Hellas<sup>o</sup> deem'd of heavenly birth,  
Muse! form'd or fabled at the minstrel's will!  
Since shamed full oft by later lyres on earth,  
Mine dares not call thee from thy sacred hill:  
5 Yet there I've wander'd by thy vaunted rill;  
Yes! sigh'd o'er Delphi's long-deserted shrine,  
Where, save that feeble fountain, all is still;  
Nor mote<sup>o</sup> my shell awake the weary Nine<sup>2</sup>  
To grace so plain a tale—this lowly lay<sup>o</sup> of mine.

#### 2

10 Whilome<sup>3</sup> in Albion's<sup>o</sup> isle there dwelt a youth,  
Who ne in virtue's ways did take delight;  
But spent his days in riot most uncouth,  
And vex'd with mirth the drowsy ear of Night.  
Ah, me! in sooth he was a shameless wight,<sup>o</sup>  
15 Sore given to revel and ungodly glee;  
Few earthly things found favour in his sight  
Save concubines and carnal companie,  
And flaunting wassailers<sup>4</sup> of high and low degree.

#### 3

Childe Harold was he hight:<sup>o</sup>—but whence his  
name  
And lineage long, it suits me not to say;  
20 Suffice it, that perchance they were of fame,

And had been glorious in another day:  
But one sad losel<sup>5</sup> soils a name for aye,  
However mighty in the olden time;  
Nor all that heralds rake from coffin'd clay,  
25 Nor florid prose, nor honied lies of rhyme,  
Can blazon evil deeds, or consecrate a crime.

#### 4

Childe Harold bask'd him in the noontide sun,  
Disporting there like any other fly;  
Nor deem'd before his little day was done  
30 One blast might chill him into misery.  
But long ere scarce a third of his pass'd by,  
Worse than adversity the Childe befell;  
He felt the fulness of satiety:  
Then loathed he in his native land to dwell,  
35 Which seem'd to him more lone than Eremite's<sup>6</sup> sad  
cell.

#### 5

For he through Sin's long labyrinth had run,  
Nor made atonement when he did amiss,  
Had sigh'd to many though he loved but one,  
And that loved one, alas! could ne'er be his.  
40 Ah, happy she! to 'scape from him whose kiss  
Had been pollution unto aught so chaste;  
Who soon had left her charms for vulgar bliss,  
And spoil'd her goodly lands to gild his waste,  
Nor calm domestic peace had ever deign'd to taste.  
45

#### 6

And now Childe Harold was sore sick at heart,

And from his fellow bacchanals<sup>7</sup> would flee;  
 'Tis said, at times the sullen tear would start,  
 But Pride congeal'd the drop within his ee:<sup>o</sup>  
 Apart he stalk'd in joyless reverie,  
 And from his native land resolved to go,  
 And visit scorching climes beyond the sea;  
 With pleasure drugg'd, he almost long'd for woe,  
 And e'en for change of scene would seek the shades  
 below.

## Endnotes

- Note 2: The Muses, whose "vaunted rill" (line 5) was the Castalian spring. "Shell": lyre. Hermes is fabled to have invented the lyre by stretching strings over the hollow of a tortoise shell.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Once upon a time; one of the many archaisms that Byron borrowed from Spenser.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Noisy, insolent drinkers (Byron is thought to refer to his own youthful carousing with friends at Newstead Abbey).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Rascal. Byron's great-uncle, the fifth Lord Byron, had killed a kinsman in a drunken duel.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A religious hermit.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Worshipers of Bacchus, ancient Roman god of wine and revelry.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *Greece*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *may*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *song*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *England's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *creature*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *called*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: eye [Return to reference °](#)

**From *Canto the Third***

## ["ONCE MORE UPON THE WATERS"]

**1**

Is thy face like thy mothers, my fair child!  
ADA!<sup>8</sup> sole daughter of my house and heart?  
When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled,  
And when we parted,—not as now we part,  
But with a hope.—

Awaking with a start,  
The waters heave around me; and on high  
The winds lift up their voices: I depart,  
Whither I know not; but the hour's gone by,  
When Albion's lessening shores could grieve or glad  
mine eye.

# 2

10       Once more upon the waters! yet once more!  
And the waves bound beneath me as a steed  
That knows his rider. Welcome, to their roar!  
Swift be their guidance, wheresoe'er it lead!  
Though the strain'd mast should quiver as a reed,  
And the rent canvass fluttering strew the gale,  
15       Still must I on; for I am as a weed,  
Flung from the rock, on Ocean's foam, to sail  
Where'er the surge may sweep, or tempest's breath  
prevail.

# 3

20 In my youth's summer<sup>9</sup> I did sing of One,  
The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind;  
Again I seize the theme, then but begun,  
And bear it with me, as the rushing wind

25 Bears the cloud onwards: in that Tale I find  
The furrows of long thought, and dried-up tears,  
Which, ebbing, leave a sterile track behind,  
O'er which all heavily the journeying years  
Plod the last sands of life,—where not a flower  
appears.

#### 4

30 Since my young days of passion—joy, or pain,  
Perchance my heart and harp have lost a string,  
And both may jar:<sup>1</sup> it may be, that in vain  
I would essay as I have sung to sing.  
Yet, though a dreary strain, to this I cling;  
So that it wean me from the weary dream  
Of selfish grief or gladness—so it fling  
35 Forgetfulness around me—it shall seem  
To me, though to none else, a not ungrateful theme.

#### 5

40 He, who grown aged in this world of woe,  
In deeds, not years, piercing the depths of life,  
So that no wonder waits him; nor below  
Can love, or sorrow, fame, ambition, strife,  
Cut to his heart again with the keen knife  
Of silent, sharp endurance: he can tell  
Why thought seeks refuge in lone caves, yet rife  
With airy images, and shapes which dwell  
45 Still unimpair'd, though old, in the soul's haunted  
cell.

#### 6

'Tis to create, and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow



With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image, even as I do now.  
What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,  
50 Soul of my thought!<sup>2</sup> with whom I traverse earth,  
Invisible but gazing, as I glow  
Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,  
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings'  
dearth.

## 7

Yet must I think less wildly:—I *have* thought  
55 Too long and darkly, till my brain became,  
In its own eddy boiling and o'erwrought,  
A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame:  
And thus, untaught in youth my heart to tame,  
My springs of life were poison'd. 'Tis too late!  
60 Yet am I changed; though still enough the same  
In strength to bear what time can not abate,  
And feed on bitter fruits without accusing Fate.

## 8

Something too much of this:—but now 'tis past,  
And the spell closes with its silent seal.<sup>3</sup>  
65 Long absent HAROLD re-appears at last;  
He of the breast which fain no more would feel,  
Wrung with the wounds which kill not, but ne'er  
heal;  
Yet Time, who changes all, had alter'd him  
In soul and aspect as in age: years steal  
70 Fire from the mind as vigour from the limb;  
And life's enchanted cup but sparkles near the brim.

## 9

His had been quaff'd too quickly, and he found  
The dregs were wormwood; but he fill'd again,  
And from a purer fount, on holier ground,  
75 And deem'd its spring perpetual; but in vain!  
Still round him clung invisibly a chain  
Which gall'd for ever, fettering though unseen,  
And heavy though it clank'd not; worn with pain,  
Which pined although it spoke not, and grew  
80 keen,  
Entering with every step he took through many a  
scene.

## 10

Secure in guarded coldness, he had mix'd  
Again in fancied safety with his kind,  
And deem'd his spirit now so firmly fix'd  
And sheathed with an invulnerable mind,  
85 That, if no joy, no sorrow lurk'd behind;  
And he, as one, might 'midst the many stand  
Unheeded, searching through the crowd to find  
Fit speculation; such as in strange land  
He found in wonder-works of God and Nature's  
90 hand.

## 11

But who can view the ripen'd rose, nor seek  
To wear it? who can curiously behold  
The smoothness and the sheen of beauty's cheek,  
Nor feel the heart can never all grow old?  
Who can contemplate Fame through clouds unfold  
95 The star which rises o'er her steep, nor climb?  
Harold, once more within the vortex, roll'd  
On with the giddy circle, chasing Time,

Yet with a nobler aim than in his youth's fond<sup>o</sup>  
prime.

## 12

100 But soon he knew himself the most unfit  
Of men to herd with Man; with whom he held  
Little in common; untaught to submit  
His thoughts to others, though his soul was quell'd  
In youth by his own thoughts; still uncompell'd,  
105 He would not yield dominion of his mind  
To spirits against whom his own rebell'd;  
Proud though in desolation; which could find  
A life within itself, to breathe without mankind.

## 13

Where rose the mountains, there to him were  
friends;  
Where roll'd the ocean, thereon was his home;  
110 Where a blue sky, and glowing clime, extends,  
He had the passion and the power to roam;  
The desert, forest, cavern, breaker's foam,  
Were unto him companionship; they spake  
A mutual language, clearer than the tome<sup>o</sup>  
105 Of his land's tongue, which he would oft forsake,  
For Nature's pages glass'd<sup>o</sup> by sunbeams on the  
lake.

## 14

Like the Chaldean,<sup>4</sup> he could watch the stars,  
Till he had peopled them with beings bright  
As their own beams; and earth, and earth-born  
120 jars,  
And human frailties, were forgotten quite:

Could he have kept his spirit to that flight  
He had been happy; but this clay will sink  
Its spark immortal, envying it the light  
To which it mounts, as if to break the link  
125 That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its  
brink.

## 15

But in Man's dwellings he became a thing  
Restless and worn, and stern and wearisome,  
Droop'd as a wild-born falcon with clipt wing,  
To whom the boundless air alone were home:  
130 Then came his fit again, which to o'ercome,  
As eagerly the barr'd-up bird will beat  
His breast and beak against his wiry dome  
Till the blood tinge his plumage, so the heat  
Of his impeded soul would through his bosom eat.  
135

## 16

Self-exiled Harold wanders forth again,  
With nought of hope left, but with less of gloom;  
The very knowledge that he lived in vain,  
That all was over on this side the tomb,  
Had made Despair a smilingness assume,  
140 Which, though 'twere wild,—as on the plunder'd  
wreck  
When mariners would madly meet their doom  
With draughts intemperate on the sinking deck,—  
Did yet inspire a cheer, which he forebore to check.

## Endnotes

- Note 8: Byron's daughter Augusta Ada, born in December 1815, a month before her parents separated. Byron's "hope" (line 5)

had been for a reconciliation, but he was never to see Ada again.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Byron wrote canto 1 at age twenty-one; he is now twenty-eight.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Sound discordant.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, Childe Harold, his literary creation.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, he sets the seal of silence on his personal tale ("spell").[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A people of ancient Babylonia, expert in astronomy.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *foolish*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *book*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *made glassy*[Return to reference °](#)

[WATERLOO]

17

145 Stop!—for thy tread is on an Empire's dust!  
An Earthquake's spoil is sepulchred below!  
Is the spot mark'd with no colossal bust?  
Nor column trophied for triumphal show?<sup>5</sup>  
None; but the moral's truth tells simpler so,  
150 As the ground was before, thus let it be;—  
How that red rain hath made the harvest grow!  
And is this all the world has gain'd by thee,  
Thou first and last of fields! king-making Victory?

18

155 And Harold stands upon this place of skulls,  
The grave of France, the deadly Waterloo;<sup>6</sup>  
How in an hour the power which gave annals  
Its gifts, transferring fame as fleeting too!  
In "pride of place" here last the eagle flew,<sup>7</sup>  
Then tore with bloody talon the rent plain,  
160 Pierced by the shaft of banded nations<sup>8</sup> through;  
Ambitions life and labours all were vain;  
He wears the shatter'd links of the world's broken  
chain.<sup>9</sup>

19

165 Fit retribution! Gaul<sup>1</sup> may champ the bit  
And foam in fetters;—but is Earth more free?  
Did nations combat to make *One* submit;  
Or league to teach all kings true sovereignty?  
What! shall reviving Thralldom again be  
The patch'd-up idol of enlighten'd days?

170            Shall we, who struck the Lion down, shall we  
             Pay the Wolf homage? proffering lowly gaze  
             And servile knees to thrones? No; *prove*<sup>2</sup> before ye  
             praise!

## 20

175            If not, o'er one fallen despot boast no more!  
             In vain fair cheeks were furrow'd with hot tears  
             For Europe's flowers long rooted up before  
             The trampler of her vineyards; in vain years  
             Of death, depopulation, bondage, fears,  
             Have all been borne, and broken by the accord  
             Of roused-up millions: all that most endears  
             Glory, is when the myrtle wreathes a sword  
180            Such as Harmodius drew on Athens' tyrant lord.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 5: Referring to the triumphal arches erected in ancient Rome to honor conquering generals, a custom Napoleon had revived.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, near Brussels, had occurred only the year before, on June 18, 1815. The battlefield, where almost fifty thousand English, Prussian, and French soldiers were killed in a single day, quickly became a gruesome tourist attraction. See "Romantic Literature and Wartime," p. 742 in this volume.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: "Pride of place," is a term of falconry, and means the highest pitch of flight [*Byron's note*, which continues by referring to the use of the term in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 2.4]. The eagle was the symbol of Napoleon.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: The Grand Alliance formed in opposition to Napoleon.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Napoleon was then a prisoner at St. Helena.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: France. Byron, like other liberals, saw the defeat of the Napoleonic tyranny as a victory for tyrannical kings and the forces of reaction throughout Europe.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Await the test (proof) of experience.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In 514 B.C.E. Harmodius and Aristogeiton, hiding their daggers in myrtle (symbol of love), killed Hipparchus, tyrant of Athens.[Return to reference 3](#)



[NAPOLEON]

**36**

There sunk the greatest, nor the worst of men,<sup>4</sup>  
Whose spirit antithetically mixt  
One moment of the mightiest, and again  
On little objects with like firmness fixt,  
320 Extreme in all things! hadst thou been betwixt,  
Thy throne had still been thine, or never been;  
For daring made thy rise as fall: thou seek'st  
Even now to re-assume the imperial mien,<sup>o</sup>  
And shake again the world, the Thunderer of the  
scene!

**37**

325 Conqueror and captive of the earth art thou!  
She trembles at thee still, and thy wild name  
Was ne'er more bruited in men's minds than now  
That thou art nothing, save the jest of Fame,  
Who woo'd thee once, thy vassal, and became  
330 The flatterer of thy fierceness, till thou wert  
A god unto thyself; nor less the same  
To the astounded kingdoms all inert,  
Who deem'd thee for a time whate'er thou didst  
assert.

**38**

335 Oh, more or less than man—in high or low,  
Battling with nations, flying from the field;  
Now making monarchs' necks thy footstool, now  
More than thy meanest<sup>o</sup> soldier taught to yield;  
An empire thou couldst crush, command, rebuild,

But govern not thy pettiest passion, nor,  
However deeply in men's spirits skill'd,  
340 Look through thine own, nor curb the lust of war,  
Nor learn that tempted Fate will leave the loftiest  
star.

### 39

Yet well thy soul hath brook'd the turning tide  
With that untaught innate philosophy,  
Which, be it wisdom, coldness, or deep pride,  
345 Is gall and wormwood to an enemy.  
When the whole host of hatred stood hard by,  
To watch and mock thee shrinking, thou hast  
smiled  
With a sedate and all-enduring eye;—  
When Fortune fled her spoil'd and favourite child,  
350 He stood unbow'd beneath the ills upon him piled.

### 40

Sager than in thy fortunes; for in them  
Ambition steel'd thee on too far to show  
That just habitual scorn which could contemn  
Men and their thoughts; 'twas wise to feel, not so  
355 To wear it ever on thy lip and brow,  
And spurn the instruments thou wert to use  
Till they were turn'd unto thine overthrow;  
'Tis but a worthless world to win or lose;  
So hath it proved to thee, and all such lot who  
360 choose.<sup>5</sup>

### 41

If, like a tower upon a headlong rock,  
Thou hadst been made to stand or fall alone,

Such scorn of man had help'd to brave the shock;  
But men's thoughts were the steps which paved  
thy throne,  
365 *Their* admiration thy best weapon shone;  
The part of Philip's son<sup>6</sup> was thine, not then  
(Unless aside thy purple had been thrown)  
Like stern Diogenes<sup>7</sup> to mock at men;  
For sceptred cynics earth were far too wide a den.

## 42

370 But quiet to quick bosoms is a hell,  
And *there* hath been thy bane; there is a fire  
And motion of the soul which will not dwell  
In its own narrow being, but aspire  
Beyond the fitting medium of desire;  
375 And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,  
Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire  
Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,  
Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

## 43

This makes the madmen who have made men  
mad  
380 By their contagion; Conquerors and Kings,  
Founders of sects and systems, to whom add  
Sophists,<sup>8</sup> Bards, Statesmen, all unquiet things  
Which stir too strongly the soul's secret springs,  
And are themselves the fools to those they fool;  
385 Envied, yet how unenviable! what stings  
Are theirs! One breast laid open were a school  
Which would unteach mankind the lust to shine or  
rule:

## 44

390 Their breath is agitation, and their life  
A storm whereon they ride, to sink at last,  
And yet so nursed and bigoted to strife,  
That should their days, surviving perils past,  
Melt to calm twilight, they feel overcast  
With sorrow and supineness, and so die;  
Even as a flame unfed, which runs to waste  
395 With its own flickering, or a sword laid by,  
Which eats into itself, and rusts ingloriously.

## 45

400 He who ascends to mountain-tops, shall find  
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;  
He who surpasses or subdues mankind,  
Must look down on the hate of those below.  
Though high *above* the sun of glory glow,  
And far *beneath* the earth and ocean spread,  
*Round* him are icy rocks, and loudly blow  
Contending tempests on his naked head,  
405 And thus reward the toils which to those summits  
led.<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

## 52

460 Thus Harold inly said, and pass'd along,  
Yet not insensibly to all which here  
Awoke the jocund birds to early song  
In glens which might have made even exile dear:  
Though on his brow were graven lines austere,  
And tranquil sternness which had ta'en the place  
465 Of feelings fierier far but less severe,  
Joy was not always absent from his face,

But o'er it in such scenes would steal with transient  
trace.

### 53

Nor was all love shut from him, though his days  
Of passion had consumed themselves to dust.  
470 It is in vain that we would coldly gaze  
On such as smile upon us; the heart must  
Leap kindly back to kindness, though disgust  
Hath wean'd it from all worldlings: thus he felt,  
For there was soft remembrance, and sweet trust  
475 In one fond breast,<sup>1</sup> to which his own would melt,  
And in its tenderer hour on that his bosom dwelt.

### 54

And he had learn'd to love,—I know not why,  
For this in such as him seems strange of mood,—  
The helpless looks of blooming infancy,  
480 Even in its earliest nurture; what subdued,  
To change like this, a mind so far imbued  
With scorn of man, it little boots to know;  
But thus it was; and though in solitude  
Small power the nipp'd affections have to grow,  
485 In him this glow'd when all beside had ceased to  
glow.

### 55

And there was one soft breast, as hath been said,  
Which unto his was bound by stronger ties  
Than the church links withal; and, though unwed,  
490 *That* love was pure, and, far above disguise,  
Had stood the test of mortal enmities  
Still undivided, and cemented more

By peril, dreaded most in female eyes;  
 But this was firm, and from a foreign shore  
 Well to that heart might his these absent greetings  
 pour!

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 4: Napoleon, here portrayed with many characteristics of the Byronic hero.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: An inversion: “all who choose such lot” (that is, who choose to play such a game of chance).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Alexander the Great, son of Philip of Macedon.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Greek philosopher of Cynicism, contemporary of Alexander. It is related that Alexander was so struck by his independence of mind that he said, “If I were not Alexander, I should wish to be Diogenes.”[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Learned men. But the term often carries a derogatory sense—thinkers with a penchant for tricky reasoning.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In the stanzas here omitted, Harold is sent sailing up the Rhine, meditating on the “thousand battles” that “have assailed thy banks.”[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Commentators agree that the reference is to Byron’s half-sister, Augusta Leigh.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *character*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lowest*[Return to reference °](#)

[SWITZERLAND]<sup>2</sup>

68

645 Lake Lemano<sup>o</sup> woos me with its crystal face,  
The mirror where the stars and mountains view  
The stillness of their aspect in each trace  
Its clear depth yields of their far height and hue:  
There is too much of man here, to look through  
With a fit mind the might which I behold;  
650 But soon in me shall Loneliness renew  
Thoughts hid, but not less cherish'd than of old,  
Ere mingling with the herd had penn'd me in their  
fold.

69

To fly from, need not be to hate, mankind:  
All are not fit with them to stir and toil,  
Nor is it discontent to keep the mind  
655 Deep in its fountain, lest it overboil  
In the hot throng, where we become the spoil  
Of our infection, till too late and long  
We may deplore and struggle with the coil,<sup>o</sup>  
In wretched interchange of wrong for wrong  
660 Midst a contentious world, striving where none are  
strong.

70

There, in a moment, we may plunge our years  
In fatal penitence, and in the blight  
Of our own soul turn all our blood to tears,  
And colour things to come with hues of Night;  
665 The race of life becomes a hopeless flight

To those that walk in darkness: on the sea,  
The boldest steer but where their ports invite,  
But there are wanderers o'er Eternity  
670 Whose bark drives on and on, and anchor'd ne'er  
shall be.

## 71

Is it not better, then, to be alone,  
And love Earth only for its earthly sake?  
By the blue rushing of the arrowy Rhone,<sup>3</sup>  
Or the pure bosom of its nursing lake,  
675 Which feeds it as a mother who doth make  
A fair but froward infant her own care,  
Kissing its cries away as these awake;—  
Is it not better thus our lives to wear,  
Than join the crushing crowd, doom'd to inflict or  
bear?

## 72

I live not in myself, but I become  
680 Portion of that around me; and to me  
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum  
Of human cities torture: I can see  
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be  
A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,  
685 Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,  
And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain  
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.<sup>4</sup>

## 73

And thus I am absorb'd, and this is life:  
I look upon the peopled desert past,  
690 As on a place of agony and strife,



Where, for some sin, to sorrow I was cast,  
To act and suffer, but remount at last  
With a fresh pinion; which I feel to spring,  
Though young, yet waxing vigorous, as the blast  
695 Which it would cope with, on delighted wing,  
Spurning the clay-cold bonds which round our being  
cling.

## 74

And when, at length, the mind shall be all free  
From what it hates in this degraded form,  
Reft of its carnal life, save what shall be  
700 Existent happier in the fly and worm,—  
When elements to elements conform,  
And dust is as it should be, shall I not  
Feel all I see, less dazzling, but more warm?  
The bodiless thought? the Spirit of each spot?  
705 Of which, even now, I share at times the immortal  
lot?

## 75

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part  
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?  
Is not the love of these deep in my heart  
With a pure passion? should I not contemn  
710 All objects, if compared with these? and stem  
A tide of suffering, rather than forego  
Such feelings for the hard and worldly phlegm  
Of those whose eyes are only turn'd below,  
715 Gazing upon the ground, with thoughts which dare  
not glow?

\* \* \*

## 85

Clear, placid Leman! thy contrasted lake,  
With the wild world I dwelt in, is a thing  
Which warns me, with its stillness, to forsake  
Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring.  
800 This quiet sail is as a noiseless wing  
To waft me from distraction; once I loved  
Torn ocean's roar, but thy soft murmuring  
Sounds sweet as if a Sister's voice reproved,  
805 That I with stern delights should e'er have been so  
moved.

## 86

It is the hush of night, and all between  
Thy margin and the mountains, dusk, yet clear,  
Mellow'd and mingling, yet distinctly seen,  
Save darken'd Jura,<sup>5</sup> whose cap heights appear  
Precipitously steep; and drawing near,  
810 There breathes a living fragrance from the shore,  
Of flowers yet fresh with childhood; on the ear  
Drops the light drip of the suspended oar,  
Or chirps the grasshopper one good-night carol  
more;

## 87

815 He is an evening reveller, who makes  
His life an infancy, and sings his fill;  
At intervals, some bird from out the brakes<sup>o</sup>  
Starts into voice a moment, then is still.  
There seems a floating whisper on the hill,  
820 But that is fancy, for the starlight dew  
All silently their tears of love instil,  
Weeping themselves away, till they infuse

Deep into Nature's breast the spirit of her hues.

**88**

Ye stars! which are the poetry of heaven!  
If in your bright leaves we would read the fate  
825 Of men and empires,—'tis to be forgiven,  
That in our aspirations to be great,  
Our destinies o'erleap their mortal state,  
And claim a kindred with you; for ye are  
830 A beauty and a mystery, and create  
In us such love and reverence from afar,  
That fortune, fame, power, life, have named  
themselves a star,

**89**

All heaven and earth are still—though not in sleep,  
But breathless, as we grow when feeling most;  
And silent, as we stand in thoughts too deep:—  
835 All heaven and earth are still: From the high host  
Of stars, to the lull'd lake and mountain-coast,  
All is concenter'd in a life intense,  
Where not a beam, nor air, nor leaf is lost,  
But hath a part of being, and a sense  
840 Of that which is of all Creator and defence.

**90**

Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt  
In solitude, where we are *least* alone;  
A truth, which through our being then doth melt  
And purifies from self: it is a tone,  
845 The soul and source of music, which makes known  
Eternal harmony, and sheds a charm,  
Like to the fabled Cytherea's zone,<sup>6</sup>

850 Binding all things with beauty;—'twould disarm  
The spectre Death, had he substantial power to  
harm.

## 91

855 Not vainly did the early Persian make  
His altar the high places and the peak  
Of earth-o'ergazing mountains, and thus take<sup>7</sup>  
A fit and unwall'd temple, there to seek  
The Spirit, in whose honour shrines are weak,  
Uprear'd of human hands. Come, and compare  
Columns and idol-dwellings, Goth or Greek,  
With Nature's realms of worship, earth and air,  
Nor fix on fond abodes to circumscribe thy prayer!

## 92

860 Thy sky is changed!—and such a change! Oh  
night,  
And storm, and darkness, ye are wondrous strong,  
Yet lovely in your strength, as is the light  
Of a dark eye in woman! Far along,  
From peak to peak, the rattling crags among  
Leaps the live thunder! Not from one lone cloud,  
865 But every mountain now hath found a tongue,  
And Jura answers, through her misty shroud,  
Back to the joyous Alps, who call to her aloud!

## 93

870 And this is in the night:—Most glorious night!  
Thou wert not sent for slumber! let me be  
A sharer in thy fierce and far delight,—  
A portion of the tempest and of thee!  
How the lit lake shines, a phosphoric sea,

And the big rain comes dancing to the earth!  
And now again 'tis black,—and now, the glee  
875 Of the loud hills shakes with its mountain-mirth,  
As if they did rejoice o'er a young earthquake's birth.

## 94

Now, where the swift Rhone cleaves his way  
between  
Heights which appear as lovers who have parted  
In hate, whose mining depths so intervene,  
880 That they can meet no more, though broken-  
hearted:  
Though in their souls, which thus each other  
thwarted,  
Love was the very root of the fond rage  
Which blighted their life's bloom, and then  
departed—  
885 Itself expired, but leaving them an age  
Of years all winters,—war within themselves to  
wage.

## 95

Now, where the quick Rhone thus hath cleft his  
way,  
The mightiest of the storms hath ta'en his stand:  
For here, not one, but many, make their play,  
And fling their thunder-bolts from hand to hand,  
890 Flashing and cast around: of all the band,  
The brightest through these parted hills hath  
fork'd  
His lightnings,—as if he did understand,  
That in such gaps as desolation work'd,  
895 There the hot shaft should blast whatever therein  
lurk'd.

## 96

Sky, mountains, river, winds, lake, lightnings! ye!  
With night, and clouds, and thunder, and a soul  
To make these felt and feeling, well may be  
Things that have made me watchful; the far roll  
900 Of your departing voices, is the knoll<sup>8</sup>  
Of what in me is sleepless,—if I rest.  
But where of ye, oh tempests! is the goal?  
Are ye like those within the human breast?  
Or do ye find, at length, like eagles, some high nest?

## 97

905 Could I embody and unbosom now  
That which is most within me,—could I wreak  
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw  
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or  
weak,  
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,  
910 Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into *one* word,  
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;  
But as it is, I live and die unheard,  
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a  
sword.

## 98

915 The morn is up again, the dewy morn,  
With breath all incense, and with cheek all bloom,  
Laughing the clouds away with playful scorn,  
And living as if earth contain'd no tomb,—  
And glowing into day: we may resume  
The march of our existence: and thus I,  
920 Still on thy shores, fair Leman! may find room  
And food for meditation, nor pass by

Much, that may give us pause, if ponder'd fittingly.

\* \* \*

### 113

1050 I have not loved the world, nor the world me;  
I have not flatter'd its rank breath, nor bow'd  
To its idolatries a patient knee,—  
Nor coin'd my cheek to smiles,—nor cried aloud  
In worship of an echo; in the crowd  
They could not deem me one of such; I stood  
1055 Among them, but not of them; in a shroud  
Of thoughts which were not their thoughts, and  
still could,  
Had I not filed<sup>9</sup> my mind, which thus itself subdued.

### 114

1060 I have not loved the world, nor the world me,—  
But let us part fair foes; I do believe,  
Though I have found them not, that there may be  
Words which are things,—hopes which will not  
deceive,  
And virtues which are merciful, nor weave  
Snares for the failing: I would also deem  
O'er others' griefs that some sincerely grieve;  
1065 That two, or one, are almost what they seem,  
That goodness is no name, and happiness no dream.

### 115

My daughter! with thy name this song begun—  
My daughter! with thy name thus much shall end  
—  
I see thee not,—I hear thee not,—but none

1070 Can be so wrapt in thee; thou art the friend  
To whom the shadows of far years extend:  
Albeit my brow thou never should'st behold,  
My voice shall with thy future visions blend,  
And reach into thy heart,—when mine is cold,—  
1075 A token and a tone, even from thy father's mould.

### 116

To aid thy mind's development,—to watch  
Thy dawn of little joys,—to sit and see  
Almost thy very growth,—to view thee catch  
Knowledge of objects,—wonders yet to thee!  
1080 To hold thee lightly on a gentle knee,  
And print on thy soft cheek a parent's kiss,—  
This, it should seem, was not reserved for me;  
Yet this was in my nature:—as it is,  
I know not what is there, yet something like to this.

### 117

1085 Yet, though dull Hate as duty should be taught,  
I know that thou wilt love me; though my name  
Should be shut from thee, as a spell still fraught  
With desolation,—and a broken claim:  
Though the grave closed between us,—'twere the  
same,  
1090 I know that thou wilt love me; though to drain  
My blood from out thy being were an aim,  
And an attainment,—all would be in vain,—  
Still thou would'st love me, still that more than life  
retain.

### 118

The child of love,—though born in bitterness  
And nurtured in convulsion,—of thy sire



1095        These were the elements,—and thine no less.  
             As yet such are around thee,—but thy fire  
             Shall be more temper'd, and thy hope far higher.  
             Sweet be thy cradled slumbers! O'er the sea,  
1100        And from the mountains where I now respire,  
             Fain would I waft such blessing upon thee,  
             As, with a sigh, I deem thou might'st have been to  
             me!

1812, 1816

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Byron with his traveling companion and physician, John Polidori, spent the gloomy summer of 1816 near Geneva, in a villa rented for its proximity to the household that Percy Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (who would marry Shelley at the end of the year), and her step-sister Claire Clairmont had set up there. The famous ghost-story-telling contest in which these five participated, and which saw the genesis of both *Frankenstein* and Polidori's "The Vampyre," took place that June. The Shelley household's involvement in *Childe Harold* is extensive. The fair copy of this canto was in fact written out by Claire, and Percy would eventually deliver it to Byron's publisher in London.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: River rising in Switzerland and flowing through France into the Mediterranean.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: During the tour around Lake Geneva that they took in late June 1816, Percy Shelley introduced Byron to the poetry of Wordsworth and Wordsworth's concepts of nature. Those ideas are reflected in canto 3, but the voice is Byron's own.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The mountain range between Switzerland and France, visible from Lake Geneva.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The sash of Venus, which conferred the power to attract love.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: It is to be recollected, that the most beautiful and impressive doctrines of the Founder of Christianity were delivered, not in the *Temple*, but on the *Mount* [*Byron's note*].[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Old form of knell: the sound of a bell.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Defiled. In a note Byron refers to *Macbeth* 3.1.66 ("For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind").[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *Geneva*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tumult*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thickets*[Return to reference °](#)

**Manfred** *Manfred* is Byron's first dramatic work. As its subtitle, "A Dramatic Poem," indicates, it was not intended to be produced on the stage; Byron also referred to it as a "metaphysical" drama—that is, a drama of ideas. He began writing it in the autumn of 1816 while living in the Swiss Alps, whose grandeur stimulated his imagination; he finished the drama the following year in Italy.

Manfred's literary forebears include the villains of Gothic fiction (another Manfred can be found in Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*; see [p. 292](#), above) and of the Gothic dramas Byron had encountered during his time on the board of managers of London's Drury Lane theater. Manfred also shares traits with the Greek Titan Prometheus, rebel against Zeus, ruler of the gods; Milton's Satan; Ahasuerus, the legendary Wandering Jew who, having ridiculed Christ as he bore the Cross to Calvary, is doomed to live until Christ's Second Coming; and Faust, who yielded his soul to the devil in exchange for superhuman powers. Byron denied that he had ever heard of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, and because he knew no German he had not read Goethe's *Faust*, of which part 1 had been published in 1808. But during an August 1816 visit to Byron and the Shelley household, Matthew Lewis (author of the Gothic novel *The Monk*; see [pp. 304–09](#), above) had read parts of *Faust* to him aloud, translating as he went, and Byron worked memories of this oral translation into his own drama in a way that evoked Goethe's admiration.

Like Byron's earlier heroes, Childe Harold and the protagonists of some of his Eastern tales, Manfred is hounded by remorse—in this instance, for a transgression that (it is hinted but never quite specified) is incest with his sister Astarte; it is also hinted that Astarte has taken her own life. While this element in the drama is often regarded as Byron's veiled confession of his incestuous relations with his half-sister, Augusta, and while Byron, ever the attention-seeker, in some ways courted this interpretation, the theme of incest was a common one in Gothic and Romantic writings. It features in *The Monk* and Walpole's closet drama *The Mysterious*

*Mother* (1768), and, at about the time Byron was composing his drama, it was also being explored by Mary and Percy Shelley.

The character of Manfred is its author's most impressive representation of the Byronic hero. Byron's invention is to have Manfred, unlike Faust, disdainfully reject the offer of a pact with the powers of darkness. He thereby sets himself up as the totally autonomous man, independent of any external authority or power, whose own mind, as he says in the concluding scene (3.4.127–40), generates the values by which he lives "in sufferance or in joy," and by reference to which he judges, requites, and finally destroys himself. In his work *Ecce Homo*, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, recognizing Byron's anticipation of his own *Übermensch* (the "superman" who posits for himself a moral code beyond all traditional standards of good and evil), asserted that the character of Manfred was greater than that of Goethe's Faust.

# Manfred

## A DRAMATIC POEM

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.[1](#)

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MANFRED  
CHAMOIS HUNTER  
ABBOT OF ST. MAURICE  
MANUEL  
HERMAN  
WITCH OF THE ALPS  
ARIMANES  
NEMESIS  
THE DESTINIES  
SPIRITS, &C.

*The Scene of the Drama is amongst the Higher Alps—partly in the  
Castle of Manfred, and partly in the Mountains.*

### **Act 1**

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Hamlet's comment after having seen his father's ghost (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1.5.168–69).[Return to reference 1](#)

## SCENE 1

MANFRED *alone*.—*Scene, a Gothic Gallery.*<sup>2</sup>—*Time, Midnight.*

MAN. The lamp must be replenish'd, but even then  
It will not burn so long as I must watch:  
My slumbers—if I slumber—are not sleep,  
But a continuance of enduring thought,  
Which then I can resist not: in my heart  
There is a vigil, and these eyes but close  
To look within; and yet I live, and bear  
The aspect and the form of breathing men.  
But grief should be the instructor of the wise;  
Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most  
Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,  
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.  
Philosophy and science, and the springs  
Of wonder, and the wisdom of the world,  
I have essay'd, and in my mind there is  
A power to make these subject to itself—  
But they avail not: I have done men good,  
And I have met with good even among men—  
But this avail'd not: I have had my foes,  
And none have baffled, many fallen before me—  
But this avail'd not:—Good, or evil, life,  
Powers, passions, all I see in other beings,  
Have been to me as rain unto the sands,  
Since that all-nameless hour. I have no dread,  
And feel the curse to have no natural fear,  
Nor fluttering throb, that beats with hopes or wishes,  
Or lurking love of something on the earth.—  
Now to my task.—

Mysterious Agency!

Ye spirits of the unbounded Universe!  
Whom I have sought in darkness and in light—  
Ye, who do compass earth about, and dwell  
In subtler essence—ye, to whom the tops  
Of mountains inaccessible are haunts,  
And earth's and ocean's caves familiar things—

I call upon ye by the written charm  
Which gives me power upon you—Rise! appear!  
[A pause.]

They come not yet.—Now by the voice of him  
Who is the first among you<sup>3</sup>—by this sign,  
Which makes you tremble—by the claims of him  
Who is undying,<sup>4</sup>—Rise! appear!—Appear!  
[A pause.]

If it be so.—Spirits of earth and air,  
Ye shall not thus elude me: by a power,  
Deeper than all yet urged, a tyrant-spell,  
Which had its birthplace in a star condemn'd,  
The burning wreck of a demolish'd world,  
A wandering hell in the eternal space;  
By the strong curse which is upon my soul,  
The thought which is within me and around me,  
I do compel ye to my will.—Appear!  
*[A star is seen at the darker end of the gallery: it is stationary; and  
voice is heard singing.]*

FIRST SPIRIT.<sup>5</sup>

Mortal! to thy bidding bow'd,  
From my mansion in the cloud,  
Which the breath of twilight builds,  
And the summer's sunset gilds  
With the azure and vermilion,  
Which is mix'd for my pavilion;  
Though thy quest may be forbidden,  
On a star-beam I have ridden;  
To thine adjuration<sup>6</sup> bow'd,  
Mortal—be thy wish avow'd!

*Voice of the* SECOND SPIRIT.

Mont Blanc<sup>6</sup> is the monarch of mountains;  
They crown'd him long ago  
On a throne of rocks, in a robe of clouds,  
With a diadem of snow.  
Around his waist are forests braced,

The Avalanche in his hand;  
But ere it fall, that thundering ball  
Must pause for my command.  
The Glacier's cold and restless mass  
Moves onward day by day;  
But I am he who bids it pass,  
Or with its ice delay.  
I am the spirit of the place,  
Could make the mountain bow  
And quiver to his cavern'd base—  
And what with me wouldst *Thou*?

*Voice of the* THIRD SPIRIT.

In the blue depth of the waters,  
Where the wave hath no strife,  
Where the wind is a stranger,  
And the sea-snake hath life,  
Where the Mermaid is decking  
Her green hair with shells;  
Like the storm on the surface  
Came the sound of thy spells;  
O'er my calm Hall of Coral  
The deep echo roll'd—  
To the Spirit of Ocean  
Thy wishes unfold!

FOURTH SPIRIT.

Where the slumbering earthquake  
Lies pillow'd on fire,  
And the lakes of bitumen<sub>o</sub>  
Rise boilingly higher;  
Where the roots of the Andes  
Strike deep in the earth,  
As their summits to heaven  
Shoot soaringly forth;  
I have quitted my birthplace,  
Thy bidding to bide—  
Thy spell hath subdued me,  
Thy will be my guide!



FIFTH SPIRIT.

I am the Rider of the wind,  
The Stirrer of the storm;  
The hurricane I left behind  
Is yet with lightning warm;  
To speed to thee, o'er shore and sea  
I swept upon the blast:  
The fleet I met sail'd well, and yet  
'Twill sink ere night be past.

SIXTH SPIRIT.

My dwelling is the shadow of the night,  
Why doth thy magic torture me with light?

SEVENTH SPIRIT.

The star which rules thy destiny  
Was ruled, ere earth began, by me:  
It was a world as fresh and fair  
As e'er revolved round sun in air;  
Its course was free and regular,  
Space bosom'd not a lovelier star.  
The hour arrived—and it became  
A wandering mass of shapeless flame,  
A pathless comet, and a curse,  
The menace of the universe;  
Still rolling on with innate force,  
Without a sphere, without a course,  
A bright deformity on high,  
The monster of the upper sky!  
And thou! beneath its influence born—  
Thou worm! whom I obey and scorn—  
Forced by a power (which is not thine,  
And lent thee but to make thee mine)  
For this brief moment to descend,  
Where these weak spirits round thee bend  
And parley with a thing like thee—  
What wouldst thou, Child of Clay! with me?

*The SEVEN SPIRITS.*

Earth, ocean, air, night, mountains, winds, thy star,  
Are at thy beck and bidding, Child of Clay!  
Before thee at thy quest their spirits are—  
What wouldst thou with us, son of mortals—say?

MAN. Forgetfulness—

FIRST SPIRIT. Of what—of whom—and why?

MAN. Of that which is within me; read it there—

Ye know it, and I cannot utter it.

SPIRIT. We can but give thee that which we possess:

Ask of us subjects, sovereignty, the power  
O'er earth, the whole, or portion, or a sign  
Which shall control the elements, whereof  
We are the dominators, each and all,  
These shall be thine.

MAN. Oblivion, self-oblivion—

Can ye not wring from out the hidden realms  
Ye offer so profusely what I ask?

SPIRIT. It is not in our essence, in our skill;  
But—thou mayst die.

MAN. Will death bestow it on me?

SPIRIT. We are immortal, and do not forget;

We are eternal; and to us the past  
Is, as the future, present. Art thou answer'd?

MAN. Ye mock me—but the power which brought ye here  
Hath made you mine. Slaves, scoff not at my will!

The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,<sup>2</sup>  
The lightning of my being, is as bright,  
Pervading, and far darting as your own,  
And shall not yield to yours, though coop'd in clay!  
Answer, or I will teach you what I am.

SPIRIT. We answer as we answer'd; our reply  
Is even in thine own words.

MAN. Why say ye so?

SPIRIT. If, as thou say'st, thine essence be as ours,  
We have replied in telling thee, the thing  
Mortals call death hath nought to do with us.

MAN. I then have call'd ye from your realms in vain;  
Ye cannot, or ye will not, aid me.

SPIRIT. Say;  
What we possess we offer; it is thine:  
Bethink ere thou dismiss us, ask again—  
Kingdom, and sway, and strength, and length of days—

MAN. Accursed! what have I to do with days?  
They are too long already.—Hence—begone!

SPIRIT. Yet pause: being here, our will would do thee service;  
Bethink thee, is there then no other gift  
Which we can make not worthless in thine eyes?

MAN. No, none: yet stay—one moment, ere we part—  
I would behold ye face to face. I hear  
Your voices, sweet and melancholy sounds,  
As music on the waters; and I see  
The steady aspect of a clear large star;  
But nothing more. Approach me as ye are,  
Or one, or all, in your accustom'd forms.

SPIRIT. We have no forms, beyond the elements  
Of which we are the mind and principle:  
But choose a form—in that we will appear.

MAN. I have no choice; there is no form on earth  
Hideous or beautiful to me. Let him,  
Who is most powerful of ye, take such aspect  
As unto him may seem most fitting—Come!

SEVENTH SPIRIT. [*appearing in the shape of a beautiful female figure*].<sup>8</sup>  
Behold!

MAN. Oh God! if it be thus, and *thou*  
Art not a madness and a mockery,  
I yet might be most happy. I will clasp thee,  
And we again will be— [The figure vanishes.]

My heart is crush'd!

[MANFRED *falls senseless*.]

(A Voice is heard in the Incantation<sup>9</sup> which follows.)

When the moon is on the wave,  
And the glow-worm in the grass,  
And the meteor on the grave,  
And the wisp on the morass;

When the falling stars are shooting,  
And the answer'd owls are hooting,  
And the silent leaves are still  
In the shadow of the hill,  
Shall my soul be upon thine,  
With a power and with a sign.

Though thy slumber may be deep,  
Yet thy spirit shall not sleep;  
There are shades which will not vanish,  
There are thoughts thou canst not banish;  
By a power to thee unknown,  
Thou canst never be alone;  
Thou art wrapt as with a shroud,  
Thou art gather'd in a cloud;  
And for ever shalt thou dwell  
In the spirit of this spell.

Though thou seest me not pass by,  
Thou shalt feel me with thine eye  
As a thing that, though unseen,  
Must be near thee, and hath been;  
And when in that secret dread  
Thou hast turn'd around thy head,  
Thou shalt marvel I am not  
As thy shadow on the spot,  
And the power which thou dost feel  
Shall be what thou must conceal.

And a magic voice and verse  
Hath baptized thee with a curse;  
And a spirit of the air  
Hath begirt thee with a snare;  
In the wind there is a voice  
Shall forbid thee to rejoice;  
And to thee shall Night deny  
All the quiet of her sky;  
And the day shall have a sun,  
Which shall make thee wish it done.

From thy false tears I did distil  
An essence which hath strength to kill;  
From thy own heart I then did wring  
The black blood in its blackest spring;  
From thy own smile I snatched the snake,  
For there it coil'd as in a brake;<sup>o</sup>  
From thy own lip I drew the charm  
Which gave all these their chiefest harm;  
In proving every poison known,  
I found the strongest was thine own.

By thy cold breast and serpent smile,  
By thy unfathom'd gulfs of guile,  
By that most seeming virtuous eye,  
By thy shut soul's hypocrisy;  
By the perfection of thine art  
Which pass'd for human thine own heart;  
By thy delight in others' pain,  
And by thy brotherhood of Cain,<sup>1</sup>  
I call upon thee! and compel  
Thyself to be thy proper Hell!<sup>2</sup>

And on thy head I pour the vial  
Which doth devote thee to this trial;  
Nor to slumber, nor to die,  
Shall be in thy destiny;  
Though thy death shall still seem near  
To thy wish, but as a fear;  
Lo! the spell now works around thee,  
And the clankless chain hath bound thee;  
O'er thy heart and brain together  
Hath the word been pass'd—now wither!

## Endnotes

- Note 2: A large chamber built in the medieval Gothic style with high, pointed arches.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Arimanes, who appears in 2.4.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Probably God, to whom traditional magic conjurations often allude.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Spirits, successively, are those of the Air, Mountain, Ocean, Earth, Winds, Night, and Manfred's guiding Star.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The highest mountain in the Alps. Percy Shelley paid tribute to it in a poem published in the same year as *Manfred*.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In Greek myth Prometheus molded man from clay and stole fire from heaven to give it to humans.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: This shape may be an image of Astarte, whose phantom appears in 2.3.97.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Byron had published this "incantation"—a magical spell—as a separate poem six months before *Manfred*, with a note explaining that the poem was "a Chorus in an unfinished Witch drama began some years ago."[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, by your kinship with Cain, who murdered his brother, Abel.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Compare Satan's words in Milton's *Paradise Lost* 4.75: "Which way I fly is Hell; my self am Hell."[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *summons*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tarlike mineral*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thicket*[Return to reference °](#)

## SCENE 2

*The Mountain of the Jungfrau.*<sup>3</sup>—Time, Morning.—  
MANFRED *alone upon the Cliffs.*

MAN. The spirits I have raised abandon me—  
The spells which I have studied baffle me—  
The remedy I reck'd of<sup>o</sup> tortured me;  
I lean no more on super-human aid,  
It hath no power upon the past, and for  
The future, till the past be gulf'd in darkness,  
It is not of my search.—My mother Earth!  
And thou fresh breaking Day, and you, ye Mountains,  
Why are ye beautiful? I cannot love ye.  
And thou, the bright eye of the universe,  
That openest over all, and unto all  
Art a delight—thou shin'st not on my heart.  
And you, ye crags, upon whose extreme edge  
I stand, and on the torrent's brink beneath  
Behold the tall pines dwindled as to shrubs  
In dizziness of distance; when a leap,  
A stir, a motion, even a breath, would bring  
My breast upon its rocky bosom's bed  
To rest for ever—wherefore do I pause?  
I feel the impulse—yet I do not plunge;  
I see the peril—yet do not recede;  
And my brain reels—and yet my foot is firm:  
There is a power upon me which withholds,  
And makes it my fatality to live;  
If it be life to wear within myself  
This barrenness of spirit, and to be  
My own soul's sepulchre, for I have ceased  
To justify my deeds unto myself—  
The last infirmity of evil.<sup>4</sup> Ay,  
Thou winged and cloud-cleaving minister,  
[*An eagle passes.*]  
Whose happy flight is highest into heaven,  
Well may'st thou swoop so near me—I should be

Thy prey, and gorge thine eaglets; thou art gone  
Where the eye cannot follow thee; but thine  
Yet pierces downward, onward, or above,  
With a pervading vision.—Beautiful!  
How beautiful is all this visible world!  
How glorious in its action and itself!  
But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,  
Half dust, half deity, alike unfit  
To sink or soar, with our mix'd essence make  
A conflict of its elements, and breathe  
The breath of degradation and of pride,  
Contending with low wants and lofty will,  
Till our mortality predominates,  
And men are—what they name not to themselves,  
And trust not to each other. Hark! the note,  
    [*The Shepherd's pipe in the distance is heard.*]  
The natural music of the mountain reed—  
For here the patriarchal days<sup>5</sup> are not  
A pastoral fable—pipes in the liberal<sup>o</sup> air,  
Mix'd with the sweet bells of the sauntering herd;  
My soul would drink those echoes.—Oh, that I were  
The viewless<sup>o</sup> spirit of a lovely sound,  
A living voice, a breathing harmony,  
A bodiless enjoyment—born and dying  
With the blest tone which made me!

*Enter from below a* CHAMOIS<sup>6</sup> HUNTER.

CHAMOIS HUNTER.

Even so

This way the chamois leapt: her nimble feet  
Have baffled me; my gains to-day will scarce  
Repay my break-neck travail.—What is here?  
Who seems not of my trade, and yet hath reach'd  
A height which none even of our mountaineers,  
Save our best hunters, may attain: his garb  
Is goodly, his mien<sup>o</sup> manly, and his air  
Proud as a free-born peasant's, at this distance.—  
I will approach him nearer.

MAN. (*not perceiving the other*). To be thus—

Grey-hair'd with anguish, like these blasted pines,



Wrecks of a single winter, barkless, branchless,  
A blighted trunk upon a cursed root,  
Which but supplies a feeling to decay—  
And to be thus, eternally but thus,  
Having been otherwise! Now furrow'd o'er  
With wrinkles, plough'd by moments, not by years  
And hours—all tortured into ages—hours  
Which I outlive!—Ye toppling crags of ice!  
Ye avalanches, whom a breath draws down  
In mountainous o'erwhelming, come and crush me—  
I hear ye momentarily above, beneath,  
Crash with a frequent conflict; but ye pass,  
And only fall on things that still would live;  
On the young flourishing forest, or the hut  
And hamlet of the harmless villager.

C. HUN. The mists begin to rise from up the valley;  
I'll warn him to descend, or he may chance  
To lose at once his way and life together.

MAN. The mists boil up around the glaciers; clouds  
Rise curling fast beneath me, white and sulphury,  
Like foam from the roused ocean of deep Hell,  
Whose every wave breaks on a living shore,  
Heap'd with the damn'd like pebbles.—I am giddy.

C. HUN. I must approach him cautiously; if near,  
A sudden step will startle him, and he  
Seems tottering already.

MAN. Mountains have fallen,  
Leaving a gap in the clouds, and with the shock  
Rocking their Alpine brethren; filling up  
The ripe green valleys with destruction's splinters;  
Damming the rivers with a sudden dash,  
Which crush'd the waters into mist, and made  
Their fountains find another channel—thus,  
Thus, in its old age, did Mount Rosenberg<sup>7</sup>—  
Why stood I not beneath it?

C. HUN. Friend! have a care,  
Your next step may be fatal!—for the love  
Of him who made you, stand not on that brink!

MAN. (*not hearing him*). Such would have been for me a fitting tomb;  
 My bones had then been quiet in their depth;  
 They had not then been strewn upon the rocks  
 For the wind's pastime—as thus—thus they shall be—  
 In this one plunge.—Farewell, ye opening heavens!  
 Look not upon me thus reproachfully—  
 Ye were not meant for me—Earth! take these atoms!  
*[As MANFRED is in act to spring from the cliff, the CHAMOIS  
 HUNTER seizes and retains him with a sudden grasp.]*

C. HUN. Hold, madman!—though aweary of thy life,  
 Stain not our pure vales with thy guilty blood—  
 Away with me—I will not quit my hold.

MAN. I am most sick at heart—nay, grasp me not—  
 I am all feebleness—the mountains whirl  
 Spinning around me—I grow blind—What art thou?

C. HUN. I'll answer that anon.—Away with me—  
 The clouds grow thicker—there—now lean on me—  
 Place your foot here—here, take this staff, and cling  
 A moment to that shrub—now give me your hand,  
 And hold fast by my girdle—softly—well—  
 The Chalet will be gain'd within an hour—  
 Come on, we'll quickly find a surer footing,  
 And something like a pathway, which the torrent  
 Hath wash'd since winter.—Come, 'tis bravely done—  
 You should have been a hunter.—Follow me.  
*[As they descend the rocks with difficulty, the scene closes.]*

## Endnotes

- Note 3: A high Alpine mountain in south-central Switzerland.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An echo of Milton's "Lycidas," where fame is identified as "That last infirmity of a noble mind" (line 71).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The days of the Old Testament patriarchs, who were shepherds.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A goatlike antelope found in the European mountains.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: In 1806, ten years before the composition of *Manfred*, a huge landslide on Mount Rossberg ("Rosenberg") had destroyed four villages and killed 457 people.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *considered*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *free-moving*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *invisible*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *appearance*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***Act 2***

## SCENE 1

### *A Cottage amongst the Bernese Alps.*<sup>8</sup>

MANFRED *and the* CHAMOIS HUNTER.

C. HUN. No, no—yet pause—thou must not yet go forth:  
Thy mind and body are alike unfit  
To trust each other, for some hours, at least;  
When thou art better, I will be thy guide—  
But whither?

MAN. It imports not: I do know  
My route full well, and need no further guidance.

C. HUN. Thy garb and gait bespeak thee of high lineage—  
One of the many chiefs, whose castled crags  
Look o'er the lower valleys—which of these  
May call thee lord? I only know their portals;  
My way of life leads me but rarely down  
To bask by the huge hearths of those old halls,  
Carousing with the vassals; but the paths,  
Which step from out our mountains to their doors,  
I know from childhood—which of these is thine?

MAN. No matter.

C. HUN. Well, sir, pardon me the question,  
And be of better cheer. Come, taste my wine;  
'Tis of an ancient vintage; many a day  
'T has thawed my veins among our glaciers, now  
Let it do thus for thine—Come, pledge me fairly.

MAN. Away, away! there's blood upon the brim!  
Will it then never—never sink in the earth?

C. HUN. What dost thou mean? thy senses wander from thee.

MAN. I say 'tis blood—my blood! the pure warm stream  
Which ran in the veins of my fathers, and in ours  
When we were in our youth, and had one heart,  
And loved each other as we should not love,  
And this was shed: but still it rises up,  
Colouring the clouds, that shut me out from heaven,  
Where thou art not—and I shall never be.

C. HUN. Man of strange words, and some half-maddening sin,

Which makes thee people<sup>o</sup> vacancy, whate'er  
Thy dread and sufferance be, there's comfort yet—  
The aid of holy men, and heavenly patience—

MAN. Patience and patience! Hence—that word was made  
For brutes of burthen, not for birds of prey;  
Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine,—  
I am not of thine order.

C. HUN. Thanks to heaven!  
I would not be of thine for the free fame  
Of William Tell;<sup>9</sup> but whatsoe'er thine ill,  
It must be borne, and these wild starts are useless.

MAN. Do I not bear it?—Look on me—I live.

C. HUN. This is convulsion, and no healthful life.

MAN. I tell thee, man! I have lived many years,  
Many long years, but they are nothing now  
To those which I must number: ages—ages—  
Space and eternity—and consciousness,  
With the fierce thirst of death—and still unslaked!

C. HUN. Why, on thy brow the seal of middle age  
Hath scarce been set; I am thine elder far.

MAN. Think'st thou existence doth depend on time?  
It doth; but actions are our epochs: mine  
Have made my days and nights imperishable,  
Endless, and all alike, as sands on the shore,  
Innumerable atoms, and one desert,  
Barren and cold, on which the wild waves break,  
But nothing rests, save carcasses and wrecks,  
Rocks, and the salt-surf weeds of bitterness.

C. HUN. Alas! he's mad—but yet I must not leave him.

MAN. I would I were—for then the things I see  
Would be but a distemper'd<sup>o</sup> dream.

C. HUN. What is it  
That thou dost see, or think thou look'st upon?

MAN. Myself, and thee—a peasant of the Alps—  
Thy humble virtues, hospitable home,  
And spirit patient, pious, proud, and free;  
Thy self-respect, grafted on innocent thoughts;  
Thy days of health, and nights of sleep; thy toils,

By danger dignified, yet guiltless; hopes  
Of cheerful old age and a quiet grave,  
With cross and garland over its green turf,  
And thy grandchildren's love for epitaph;  
This do I see—and then I look within—  
It matters not—my soul was scorch'd already!

C. HUN. And would'st thou then exchange thy lot for mine?

MAN. No, friend! I would not wrong thee, nor exchange  
My lot with living being: I can bear—  
However wretchedly, 'tis still to bear—  
In life what others could not brook to dream,  
But perish in their slumber.

C. HUN. And with this—  
This cautious feeling for another's pain,  
Canst thou be black with evil?—say not so.  
Can one of gentle thoughts have wreak'd revenge  
Upon his enemies?

MAN. Oh! no, no, no!  
My injuries came down on those who loved me—  
On those whom I best loved; I never quell'd<sup>o</sup>  
An enemy, save in my just defence—  
My wrongs were all on those I should have cherished  
But my embrace was fatal.

C. HUN. Heaven give thee rest!  
And penitence restore thee to thyself;  
My prayers shall be for thee.

MAN. I need them not,  
But can endure thy pity. I depart—  
'Tis time—farewell!—Here's gold, and thanks for thee—  
No words—it is thy due.—Follow me not—  
I know my path—the mountain peril's past:  
And once again, I charge thee, follow not!

[Exit MANFRED.]

## Endnotes

- Note 8: A mountain range in south-central Switzerland. [Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: The hero who, according to legend, liberated Switzerland from Austrian oppression in the 14th century.[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *populate*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *disturbed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *killed*[Return to reference °](#)



## SCENE 2

*A lower Valley in the Alps.—A Cataract.*

*Enter MANFRED.*

It is not noon—the sunbow's rays<sup>1</sup> still arch  
The torrent with the many hues of heaven,  
And roll the sheeted silver's waving column  
O'er the crag's headlong perpendicular,  
And fling its lines of foaming light along,  
And to and fro, like the pale courser's tail,  
The Giant steed, to be bestrode by Death,  
As told in the Apocalypse.<sup>2</sup> No eyes  
But mine now drink this sight of loveliness;  
I should be sole in this sweet solitude,  
And with the Spirit of the place divide  
The homage of these waters.—I will call her.

*[MANFRED takes some of the water into the palm of his hand, and flings it into the air, muttering the adjuration. After a pause, the WITCH OF THE ALPS rises beneath the arch of the sunbow of the torrent.]*

Beautiful Spirit! with thy hair of light,  
And dazzling eyes of glory, in whose form  
The charms of Earth's least mortal daughters grow  
To an unearthly stature, in an essence  
Of purer elements; while the hues of youth,—  
Carnation'd like a sleeping infant's cheek,  
Rock'd by the beating of her mother's heart,  
Or the rose tints, which summer's twilight leaves  
Upon the lofty glacier's virgin snow,  
The blush of earth embracing with her heaven,—  
Tinge thy celestial aspect, and make tame  
The beauties of the sunbow which bends o'er thee.  
Beautiful Spirit! in thy calm clear brow,  
Wherein is glass'd<sup>o</sup> serenity of soul,  
Which of itself shows immortality,  
I read that thou wilt pardon to a Son  
Of Earth, whom the abstruser powers permit

At times to commune with them—if that he  
Avail him of his spells—to call thee thus,  
And gaze on thee a moment.

WITCH. Son of Earth!

I know thee, and the powers which give thee power;  
I know thee for a man of many thoughts,  
And deeds of good and ill, extreme in both,  
Fatal and fated in thy sufferings.

I have expected this—what would'st thou with me?

MAN. To look upon thy beauty—nothing further.

The face of the earth hath madden'd me, and I  
Take refuge in her mysteries, and pierce  
To the abodes of those who govern her—  
But they can nothing aid me. I have sought  
From them what they could not bestow, and now  
I search no further.

WITCH. What could be the quest

Which is not in the power of the most powerful,  
The rulers of the invisible?

MAN. A boon;

But why should I repeat it? 'twere in vain.

WITCH. I know not that; let thy lips utter it.

MAN. Well, though it torture me, 'tis but the same;  
My pang shall find a voice. From my youth upwards  
My spirit walk'd not with the souls of men,  
Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;  
The thirst of their ambition was not mine,  
The aim of their existence was not mine;  
My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,  
Made me a stranger; though I wore the form,  
I had no sympathy with breathing flesh,  
Nor midst the creatures of clay that girded me  
Was there but one who—but of her anon.  
I said, with men, and with the thoughts of men,  
I held but slight communion; but instead,  
My joy was in the Wilderness, to breathe  
The difficult air of the iced mountain's top,  
Where the birds dare not build, nor insect's wing  
Flit o'er the herbless granite; or to plunge

Into the torrent, and to roll along  
On the swift whirl of the new breaking wave  
Of river-stream, or ocean, in their flow.  
In these my early strength exulted; or  
To follow through the night the moving moon,  
The stars and their development; or catch  
The dazzling lightnings till my eyes grew dim;  
Or to look, list'ning, on the scatter'd leaves,  
While Autumn winds were at their evening song.  
These were my pastimes, and to be alone;  
For if the beings, of whom I was one,—  
Hating to be so,—cross'd me in my path,  
I felt myself degraded back to them,  
And was all clay again. And then I dived,  
In my lone wanderings, to the caves of death,  
Searching its cause in its effect; and drew  
From wither'd bones, and skulls, and heap'd up dust,  
Conclusions most forbidden.<sup>3</sup> Then I pass'd  
The nights of years in sciences untaught,  
Save in the old time; and with time and toil,  
And terrible ordeal, and such penance  
As in itself hath power upon the air,  
And spirits that do compass air and earth,  
Space, and the peopled infinite, I made  
Mine eyes familiar with Eternity,  
Such as, before me, did the Magi,<sup>4</sup> and  
He who from out their fountain dwellings raised  
Eros and Anteros, at Gadara,<sup>5</sup>  
As I do thee:—and with my knowledge grew  
The thirst of knowledge, and the power and joy  
Of this most bright intelligence; until——

WITCH. Proceed.

MAN. Oh! I but thus prolong'd my words,  
Boasting these idle attributes, because  
As I approach the core of my heart's grief—  
But to my task. I have not named to thee  
Father or mother, mistress, friend, or being,  
With whom I wore the chain of human ties;

If I had such, they seem'd not such to me—  
Yet there was one——

WITCH. Spare not thyself—proceed.

MAN. She was like me in lineaments—her eyes,  
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone  
Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;  
But soften'd all, and temper'd into beauty;  
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,  
The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind  
To comprehend the universe: nor these  
Alone, but with them gentler powers than mine,  
Pity, and smiles, and tears—which I had not;  
And tenderness—but that I had for her;  
Humility—and that I never had.  
Her faults were mine—her virtues were her own—  
I loved her, and destroy'd her!

WITCH. With thy hand?

MAN. Not with my hand, but heart—which broke her heart—  
It gazed on mine, and wither'd. I have shed  
Blood, but not hers—and yet her blood was shed—  
I saw—and could not stanch it.

WITCH. And for this—  
A being of the race thou dost despise,  
The order which thine own would rise above,  
Mingling with us and ours, thou dost forego  
The gifts of our great knowledge, and shrink'st back  
To recreant mortality—Away!

MAN. Daughter of Air! I tell thee, since that hour—  
But words are breath—look on me in my sleep,  
Or watch my watchings—Come and sit by me!  
My solitude is solitude no more,  
But peopled with the Furies;—I have gnash'd  
My teeth in darkness till returning morn,  
Then cursed myself till sunset;—I have pray'd  
For madness as a blessing—'tis denied me.  
I have affronted death—but in the war  
Of elements the waters shrunk from me,  
And fatal things pass'd harmless—the cold hand  
Of an all-pitiless demon held me back,



Or joy that ends in agony or faintness—  
In all the days of past and future, for  
In life there is no present, we can number  
How few—how less than few—wherein the soul  
Forbears to pant for death, and yet draws back  
As from a stream in winter, though the chill  
Be but a moment's. I have one resource  
Still in my science—I can call the dead,  
And ask them what it is we dread to be:  
The sternest answer can but be the Grave,  
And that is nothing—if they answer not—  
The buried Prophet answered to the Hag  
Of Endor;<sup>8</sup> and the Spartan Monarch drew  
From the Byzantine maid's unsleeping spirit  
An answer and his destiny—he slew  
That which he loved, unknowing what he slew,  
And died unpardon'd—though he call'd in aid  
The Phyxian Jove, and in Phigalia roused  
The Arcadian Evocators to compel  
The indignant shadow to depose her wrath,<sup>9</sup>  
Or fix her term of vengeance—she replied  
In words of dubious import, but fulfill'd.  
If I had never lived, that which I love  
Had still been living; had I never loved,  
That which I love would still be beautiful—  
Happy and giving happiness. What is she?  
What is she now?—a sufferer for my sins—  
A thing I dare not think upon—or nothing.  
Within few hours I shall not call in vain—  
Yet in this hour I dread the thing I dare:  
Until this hour I never shrunk to gaze  
On spirit, good or evil—now I tremble,  
And feel a strange cold thaw upon my heart.  
But I can act even what I most abhor,  
And champion human fears.—The night approaches.  
[Exit.]

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This iris is formed by the rays of the sun over the lower part of the Alpine torrents: it is exactly like a rainbow come to pay a visit, and so close that you may walk into it: this effect lasts until noon [*Byron's note*].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Revelation 6:8: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Compare passages from Victor Frankenstein's account of his scientific investigations. "To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death"; "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave . . . ?" (chap. 4).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Masters of occult knowledge (plural of *magus*).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Byron's note to lines 92–93 identifies this figure as Iamblicus, the 4th-century Neoplatonic philosopher, who called up Eros, god of love, and Anteros, god of unrequited love, from the hot springs named after them at Gadara, in Syria.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, my imagination had at one time been, in its creative powers, as rich as King Croesus (the legendary monarch famed for his wealth). Manfred's self-description in this passage, as longing for a death that is denied him, is modeled on the legend, often treated in Romantic literature, of the Wandering Jew.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Occult bodies of knowledge.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The Woman of Endor, at the behest of King Saul, summoned up the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel, who foretold that in an impending battle the Philistines would conquer the Israelites and kill Saul and his sons (1 Samuel 28:7–19).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Plutarch relates that King Pausanias ("the Spartan Monarch") had accidentally killed Cleonice ("the Byzantine maid"), whom he desired as his mistress. Her ghost haunted him until he called up her spirit to beg her forgiveness. She told him, enigmatically, that he would quickly be freed from his troubles; soon after that, he was killed. Another Pausanias, author of the *Description of Greece*, adds the details that King Pausanias, in the vain attempt to purge his guilt, had called for aid from Jupiter Phyxius and consulted the Evocators at Phigalia, in Arcadia, who had the power to call up the souls of the dead.[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *reflected* [Return to reference °](#)



### SCENE 3

#### *The Summit of the Jungfrau Mountain.*

*Enter FIRST DESTINY.*<sup>1</sup>

The moon is rising broad, and round, and bright;  
And here on snows, where never human foot  
Of common mortal trod, we nightly tread,  
And leave no traces; o'er the savage sea,  
The glassy ocean of the mountain ice,  
We skim its rugged breakers, which put on  
The aspect of a tumbling tempest's foam,  
Frozen in a moment—a dead whirlpool's image.  
And this most steep fantastic pinnacle,  
The fretwork of some earthquake—where the clouds  
Pause to repose themselves in passing by—  
Is sacred to our revels, or our vigils;  
Here do I wait my sisters, on our way  
To the Hall of Arimanes,<sup>2</sup> for to-night  
Is our great festival—'tis strange they come not.

*A Voice without, singing.*

The Captive Usurper,<sup>3</sup>  
Hurl'd down from the throne,  
Lay buried in torpor,  
Forgotten and lone;  
I broke through his slumbers,  
I shiver'd his chain,  
I leagued him with numbers—  
He's Tyrant again!

With the blood of a million he'll answer my care,  
With a nation's destruction—his flight and despair.

*Second Voice, without.*

The ship sail'd on, the ship sail'd fast,  
But I left not a sail, and I left not a mast;  
There is not a plank of the hull or the deck,  
And there is not a wretch to lament o'er his wreck;  
Save one, whom I held, as he swam, by the hair,

And he was a subject well worthy my care;  
A traitor on land, and a pirate at sea—  
But I saved him to wreak further havoc for me!

FIRST DESTINY, *answering*.

The city lies sleeping;  
The morn, to deplore it,  
May dawn on it weeping:  
Sullenly, slowly,  
The black plague flew o'er it—  
Thousands lie lowly;  
Tens of thousands shall perish—  
The living shall fly from  
The sick they should cherish;  
But nothing can vanquish  
The touch that they die from.  
Sorrow and anguish,  
And evil and dread,  
Envelope a nation—  
The blest are the dead,  
Who see not the sight  
Of their own desolation—  
This work of a night—  
This wreck of a realm—this deed of my doing—  
For ages I've done, and shall still be renewing!

*Enter the SECOND and THIRD DESTINIES.*

*The Three.*

Our hands contain the hearts of men,  
Our footsteps are their graves;  
We only give to take again  
The spirits of our slaves!

FIRST DES. Welcome!—Where's Nemesis?<sup>4</sup>

SECOND DES. At some great work;

But what I know not, for my hands were full.

THIRD DES. Behold she cometh.

*Enter NEMESIS.*

FIRST DES.

Say, where hast thou been?

My sisters and thyself are slow to-night.

NEM. I was detain'd repairing shatter'd thrones,

Marrying fools, restoring dynasties,<sup>5</sup>

Avenging men upon their enemies,

And making them repent their own revenge;

Goading the wise to madness; from the dull

Shaping out oracles to rule the world

Afresh, for they were waxing out of date,

And mortals dared to ponder for themselves,

To weigh kings in the balance, and to speak

Of freedom, the forbidden fruit.—Away!

We have outstay'd the hour—mount we our clouds!

*[Exeunt.]*

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The three Destinies are modeled on both the witches of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the three Fates of classical mythology, who, in turn, spin, measure, and then cut the thread of an individual's life.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The name is derived from Ahriman, who in the dualistic Zoroastrian religion was the principle of darkness and evil.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Napoleon. The song of the first Voice alludes to Napoleon's escape from his captivity on the island of Elba in March 1815. After his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo he was imprisoned on another island, St. Helena, in October 1815.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The Greek and Roman goddess of vengeance, particularly of the sin of hubris, overweening presumption against the gods.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Alluding to Byron's marriage and to the restoration of monarchies across Europe that followed the Battle of Waterloo.[Return to reference 5](#)

## SCENE 4

*The Hall of Arimanes—Arimanes on his Throne, a Globe of Fire,  
surrounded by the Spirits.*

### *Hymn of the SPIRITS.*

Hail to our Master!—Prince of Earth and Air!  
Who walks the clouds and waters—in his hand  
The sceptre of the elements, which tear  
Themselves to chaos at his high command!  
5 He breatheth—and a tempest shakes the sea;  
He speaketh—and the clouds reply in thunder;  
He gazeth—from his glance the sunbeams flee;  
He moveth—earthquakes rend the world asunder.  
Beneath his footsteps the volcanoes rise;  
His shadow is the Pestilence; his path  
10 The comets herald through the crackling skies;  
And planets turn to ashes at his wrath.  
To him War offers daily sacrifice;  
To him Death pays his tribute; Life is his,  
With all its infinite of agonies—  
15 And his the spirit of whatever is!

### *Enter the DESTINIES and NEMESIS.*

FIRST DES. Glory to Arimanes! on the earth  
His power increaseth—both my sisters did  
His bidding, nor did I neglect my duty!  
SECOND DES. Glory to Arimanes! we who bow  
20 The necks of men, bow down before his throne!  
THIRD DES. Glory to Arimanes! we await  
His nod!  
NEM. Sovereign of Sovereigns! we are thine,  
And all that liveth, more or less, is ours,  
And most things wholly so; still to increase  
25 Our power, increasing thine, demands our care,

And we are vigilant—Thy late commands  
Have been fulfill'd to the utmost.

*Enter MANFRED.*

A SPIRIT. What is here?  
A mortal!—Thou most rash and fatal wretch,  
Bow down and worship!

30 SECOND SPIRIT. I do know the man—  
A Magian<sup>o</sup> of great power, and fearful skill!

THIRD SPIRIT. Bow down and worship, slave!—  
What, know'st  
thou not

Thine and our Sovereign?—Tremble, and obey!  
ALL THE SPIRITS. Prostrate thyself, and thy  
condemned clay,  
Child of the Earth! or dread the worst.

35 MAN. I know it;  
And yet ye see I kneel not.

FOURTH SPIRIT. 'Twill be taught thee.

MAN. 'Tis taught already;—many a night on the  
earth,  
On the bare ground, have I bow'd down my face,  
And strew'd my head with ashes; I have known  
The fulness of humiliation, for  
40 I sunk before my vain despair, and knelt  
To my own desolation.

FIFTH SPIRIT. Dost thou dare  
Refuse to Arimanes on his throne  
What the whole earth accords, beholding not  
The terror of his Glory?—Crouch! I say.

45 MAN. Bid *him* bow down to that which is above him,  
The overruling Infinite—the Maker  
Who made him not for worship—let him kneel,  
And we will kneel together.

THE SPIRITS. Crush the worm!  
Tear him in pieces!—

50 FIRST DES. Hence! Avaunt!—he's mine.  
Prince of the Powers invisible! This man  
Is of no common order, as his port  
And presence here denote; his sufferings  
Have been of an immortal nature, like  
55 Our own; his knowledge, and his powers and will,  
As far as is compatible with clay,  
Which clogs the ethereal essence, have been such  
As clay hath seldom borne; his aspirations  
Have been beyond the dwellers of the earth,  
60 And they have only taught him what we know—  
That knowledge is not happiness, and science  
But an exchange of ignorance for that  
Which is another kind of ignorance.  
This is not all—the passions, attributes  
Of earth and heaven, from which no power, nor  
65 being,  
Nor breath from the worm upwards is exempt,  
Have pierced his heart; and in their consequence  
Made him a thing, which I, who pity not,  
Yet pardon those who pity. He is mine,  
70 And thine, it may be—be it so, or not,  
No other Spirit in this region hath  
A soul like his—or power upon his soul.

NEM. What doth he here then?

FIRST DES. Let him answer that.

MAN. Ye know what I have known; and without  
power  
75 I could not be amongst ye: but there are  
Powers deeper still beyond—I come in quest  
Of such, to answer unto what I seek.

NEM. What would'st thou?

MAN. Thou canst not reply to  
me.

Call up the dead—my question is for them.

NEM. Great Arimanes, doth thy will avouch<sup>o</sup>



105                               By the power which hath broken  
                                  The grave which enthrall'd thee,  
                                  Speak to him who hath spoken,  
                                  Or those who have call'd thee!

MAN.                               She is silent,

                                  And in that silence I am more than answer'd.

110 NEM.   My power extends no further. Prince of air!  
                                  It rests with thee alone—command her voice.

ARI.   Spirit—obey this sceptre!

NEM.                               Silent still!

                                  She is not of our order, but belongs  
                                  To the other powers. Mortal! thy quest is vain,  
115                               And we are baffled also.

MAN.                               Hear me, hear me—

Asarte! my beloved! speak to me:

I have so much endured—so much endure—

Look on me! the grave hath not changed thee  
more

120 Than I am changed for thee. Thou lovedst me  
Too much, as I loved thee: we were not made  
To torture thus each other, though it were  
The deadliest sin to love as we have loved.

                                  Say that thou loath'st me not—that I do bear  
125 This punishment for both—that thou wilt be  
One of the blessed—and that I shall die;

For hitherto all hateful things conspire

To bind me in existence—in a life

Which makes me shrink from immortality—

A future like the past. I cannot rest.

130 I know not what I ask, nor what I seek:

I feel but what thou art—and what I am;

And I would hear yet once before I perish

The voice which was my music—Speak to me!

135 For I have call'd on thee in the still night,  
Startled the slumbering birds from the hush'd  
                                  boughs,



And woke the mountain wolves, and made the  
 caves  
 Acquainted with thy vainly echoed name,  
 Which answer'd me—many things answer'd me—  
 Spirits and men—but thou wert silent all.  
 140 Yet speak to me! I have outwatch'd the stars,  
 And gazed o'er heaven in vain in search of thee.  
 Speak to me! I have wander'd o'er the earth,  
 And never found thy likeness—Speak to me!  
 145 Look on the fiends around—they feel for me:  
 I fear them not, and feel for thee alone—  
 Speak to me! though it be in wrath;—but say—  
 I reckon not what—but let me hear thee once—  
 This once—once more!  
 PHANTOM OF ASTARTE. Manfred!  
 MAN. Say on, say on—  
 I live but in the sound—it is thy voice!  
 150 PHAN. Manfred! To-morrow ends thine earthly ills.  
 Farewell!  
 MAN. Yet one word more—am I forgiven?  
 PHAN. Farewell!  
 MAN. Say, shall we meet again?  
 PHAN. Farewell!  
 MAN. One word for mercy! Say, thou lovest  
 me.  
 PHAN. Manfred!  
 [*The Spirit of ASTARTE disappears.*]  
 NEM. She's gone, and will not be recall'd;  
 155 Her words will be fulfill'd. Return to the earth.  
 A SPIRIT. He is convulsed—This is to be a mortal  
 And seek the things beyond mortality.  
 ANOTHER SPIRIT. Yet, see, he mastereth himself, and  
 makes  
 His torture tributary to his will.  
 160 Had he been one of us, he would have made  
 An awful spirit.



## ***Act 3***

## SCENE 1

### *A Hall in the Castle of Manfred.*

MANFRED *and* HERMAN.

MAN. What is the hour?

HER. It wants but one till sunset,  
And promises a lovely twilight.

MAN. Say,  
Are all things so disposed of in the tower  
As I directed?

HER. All, my lord, are ready:  
Here is the key and casket.

MAN. It is well:  
Thou may'st retire. [*Exit* HERMAN.]

MAN. (*alone*). There is a calm upon me—  
Inexplicable stillness! which till now  
Did not belong to what I knew of life.  
If that I did not know philosophy  
To be of all our vanities the motliest,<sup>7</sup>  
The merest word that ever fool'd the ear  
From out the schoolman's jargon, I should deem  
The golden secret, the sought "Kalon,"<sup>8</sup> found,  
And seated in my soul. It will not last,  
But it is well to have known it, though but once:  
It hath enlarged my thoughts with a new sense,  
And I within my tablets would note down  
That there is such a feeling. Who is there?

*Re-enter* HERMAN.

HER. My lord, the abbot of St. Maurice<sup>9</sup> craves  
To greet your presence.

*Enter the* ABBOT OF ST. MAURICE.

ABBOT. Peace be with Count Manfred!

MAN. Thanks, holy father! welcome to these walls;  
Thy presence honours them, and blesseth those  
Who dwell within them.

ABBOT. Would it were so, Count!—

But I would fain confer with thee alone.

MAN. Herman, retire.—What would my reverend guest?

[*Exit* HERMAN.]

ABBOT. Thus, without prelude:—Age and zeal, my office,<sup>1</sup>  
And good intent, must plead my privilege;  
Our near, though not acquainted neighbourhood,  
May also be my herald. Rumours strange,  
And of unholy nature, are abroad,  
And busy with thy name; a noble name  
For centuries: may he who bears it now  
Transmit it unimpaired!

MAN. Proceed,—I listen.

ABBOT. 'Tis said thou holdest converse with the things  
Which are forbidden to the search of man;  
That with the dwellers of the dark abodes,  
The many evil and unheavenly spirits  
Which walk the valley of the shade of death,  
Thou communest. I know that with mankind,  
Thy fellows in creation, thou dost rarely  
Exchange thy thoughts, and that thy solitude  
Is as an anchorite's,<sup>2</sup> were it but holy.

MAN. And what are they who do avouch these things?

ABBOT. My pious brethren—the scared peasantry—  
Even thy own vassals—who do look on thee  
With most unquiet eyes. Thy life's in peril.

MAN. Take it.

ABBOT. I come to save, and not destroy—  
I would not pry into thy secret soul;  
But if these things be sooth, there still is time  
For penitence and pity: reconcile thee  
With the true church, and through the church to heaven.

MAN. I hear thee. This is my reply: whate'er  
I may have been, or am, doth rest between  
Heaven and myself.—I shall not choose a mortal  
To be my mediator. Have I sinn'd  
Against your ordinances? prove and punish!

ABBOT. My son! I did not speak of punishment,  
But penitence and pardon;—with thyself

The choice of such remains—and for the last,  
Our institutions and our strong belief  
Have given me power to smooth the path from sin  
To higher hope and better thoughts; the first  
I leave to heaven,—“Vengeance is mine alone!”  
So saith the Lord,<sup>3</sup> and with all humbleness  
His servant echoes back the awful word.

MAN. Old man! there is no power in holy men,  
Nor charm in prayer—nor purifying form  
Of penitence—nor outward look—nor fast—  
Nor agony—nor, greater than all these,  
The innate tortures of that deep despair,  
Which is remorse without the fear of hell,  
But all in all sufficient to itself  
Would make a hell of heaven—can exorcise  
From out the unbounded spirit the quick sense  
Of its own sins, wrongs, sufferance, and revenge  
Upon itself; there is no future pang  
Can deal that justice on the self-condemn’d  
He deals on his own soul.

ABBOT. All this is well;  
For this will pass away, and be succeeded  
By an auspicious hope, which shall look up  
With calm assurance to that blessed place,  
Which all who seek may win, whatever be  
Their earthly errors, so they be atoned:  
And the commencement of atonement is  
The sense of its necessity.—Say on—  
And all our church can teach thee shall be taught;  
And all we can absolve thee shall be pardon’d.

MAN. When Rome’s sixth emperor<sup>4</sup> was near his last,  
The victim of a self-inflicted wound,  
To shun the torments of a public death  
From senates once his slaves, a certain soldier,  
With show of loyal pity, would have stanch’d  
The gushing throat with his officious robe;  
The dying Roman thrust him back, and said—  
Some empire still in his expiring glance—

"It is too late—is this fidelity?"

ABBOT. And what of this?

MAN. I answer with the Roman—

"It is too late!"

ABBOT. It never can be so,  
To reconcile thyself with thy own soul,  
And thy own soul with heaven. Hast thou no hope?  
'Tis strange—even those who do despair above,  
Yet shape themselves some fantasy on earth,  
To which frail twig they cling, like drowning men.

MAN. Ay—father! I have had those earthly visions  
And noble aspirations in my youth,  
To make my own the mind of other men,  
The enlightener of nations; and to rise  
I knew not whither—it might be to fall;  
But fall, even as the mountain-cataract,  
Which having leapt from its more dazzling height,  
Even in the foaming strength of its abyss  
(Which casts up misty columns that become  
Clouds raining from the re-ascended skies),  
Lies low but mighty still.—But this is past,  
My thoughts mistook themselves.

ABBOT. And wherefore so?

MAN. I could not tame my nature down; for he  
Must serve who fain would sway—and soothe—and sue—  
And watch all time—and pry into all place—  
And be a living lie—who would become  
A mighty thing amongst the mean, and such  
The mass are; I disdain'd to mingle with  
A herd, though to be leader—and of wolves.  
The lion is alone, and so am I.

ABBOT. And why not live and act with other men?

MAN. Because my nature was averse from life;  
And yet not cruel; for I would not make,  
But find a desolation:—like the wind,  
The red-hot breath of the most lone Simoom,<sup>5</sup>  
Which dwells but in the desert, and sweeps o'er  
The barren sands which bear no shrubs to blast,

And revels o'er their wild and arid waves,  
And seeketh not, so that it is not sought,  
But being met is deadly; such hath been  
The course of my existence; but there came  
Things in my path which are no more.

ABBOT. Alas!

I 'gin to fear that thou art past all aid  
From me and from my calling; yet so young,  
I still would—

MAN. Look on me! there is an order  
Of mortals on the earth, who do become  
Old in their youth, and die ere middle age,  
Without the violence of warlike death;  
Some perishing of pleasure—some of study—  
Some worn with toil—some of mere weariness—  
Some of disease—and some insanity—  
And some of wither'd, or of broken hearts;  
For this last is a malady which slays  
More than are number'd in the lists of Fate,  
Taking all shapes, and bearing many names.  
Look upon me! for even of all these things  
Have I partaken; and of all these things,  
One were enough; then wonder not that I  
Am what I am, but that I ever was,  
Or having been, that I am still on earth.

ABBOT. Yet, hear me still—

MAN. Old man! I do respect  
Thine order, and revere thine years; I deem  
Thy purpose pious, but it is in vain:  
Think me not churlish; I would spare thyself,  
Far more than me, in shunning at this time  
All further colloquy—and so—farewell.

[Exit MANFRED.]

ABBOT. This should have been a noble creature: he  
Hath all the energy which would have made  
A goodly frame of glorious elements,  
Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,  
It is an awful chaos—light and darkness—  
And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts



Mix'd, and contending without end or order,  
All dormant or destructive: he will perish,  
And yet he must not; I will try once more,  
For such are worth redemption; and my duty  
Is to dare all things for a righteous end.  
I'll follow him—but cautiously, though surely.

[*Exit* ABBOT.]

## Endnotes

- Note 7: "The most diverse" or, possibly, "the most foolish" (*motley* was the multicolored suit worn by a court jester).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Greek for both "the Beautiful" and "the Good."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In the Rhone Valley in Switzerland.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Position in the church.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A person who, for religious reasons, lives in seclusion.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Romans 12:19: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Byron transfers to Otho, the sixth emperor, a story that the historian Suetonius tells about the death of an earlier emperor, Nero.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A hot, sand-laden wind in the Sahara and Arabian deserts.[Return to reference 5](#)

## SCENE 2

### *Another Chamber.*

MANFRED *and* HERMAN.

HER. My lord, you bade me wait on you at sunset:  
He sinks behind the mountain.

MAN. Doth he so?

I will look on him.

[MANFRED *advances to the Window of the Hall.*]

Glorious Orb! the idol

Of early nature, and the vigorous race  
Of undiseased mankind, the giant sons  
Of the embrace of angels, with a sex  
More beautiful than they, which did draw down  
The erring spirits<sup>6</sup> who can ne'er return.—  
Most glorious orb! that wert a worship, ere  
The mystery of thy making was reveal'd!  
Thou earliest minister of the Almighty,  
Which gladden'd, on their mountain tops, the hearts  
Of the Chaldean<sup>o</sup> shepherds, till they pour'd  
Themselves in orisons!<sup>o</sup> Thou material God!  
And representative of the Unknown—  
Who chose thee for his shadow! Thou chief star!  
Centre of many stars! which mak'st our earth  
Endurable, and temperest the hues  
And hearts of all who walk within thy rays!  
Sire of the seasons! Monarch of the climes,  
And those who dwell in them! for near or far,  
Our inborn spirits have a tint of thee,  
Even as our outward aspects;—thou dost rise,  
And shine, and set in glory. Fare thee well!  
I ne'er shall see thee more. As my first glance  
Of love and wonder was for thee, then take  
My latest look: thou wilt not beam on one  
To whom the gifts of life and warmth have been  
Of a more fatal nature. He is gone:  
I follow.

[*Exit* MANFRED.]

## Endnotes

- Note 6: Genesis 6:4: "There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown." Byron interprets "the sons of God" as denoting disobedient angels. [Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *Babylonian* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *prayers* [Return to reference °](#)

### SCENE 3

*The Mountains.—The Castle of Manfred at some distance.—A Terrace before a Tower.—Time, Twilight.*

HERMAN, MANUEL, *and other Dependants of* MANFRED.

HER. 'Tis strange enough; night after night, for years,  
He hath pursued long vigils in this tower,  
Without a witness. I have been within it,—  
So have we all been oft-times; but from it,  
Or its contents, it were impossible  
To draw conclusions absolute, of aught  
His studies tend to. To be sure, there is  
One chamber where none enter: I would give  
The fee<sup>o</sup> of what I have to come these three years,  
To pore upon its mysteries.

MANUEL. 'Twere dangerous;  
Content thyself with what thou know'st already.

HER. Ah! Manuel! thou art elderly and wise,  
And couldst say much; thou hast dwelt within the castle—  
How many years is't?

MANUEL. Ere Count Manfred's birth,  
I served his father, whom he nought resembles.

HER. There be more sons in like predicament.  
But wherein do they differ?

MANUEL. I speak not  
Of features or of form, but mind and habits;  
Count Sigismund was proud,—but gay and free,—  
A warrior and a reveller; he dwelt not  
With books and solitude, nor made the night  
A gloomy vigil, but a festal time,  
Merrier than day; he did not walk the rocks  
And forests like a wolf, nor turn aside  
From men and their delights.

HER. Beshrew<sup>z</sup> the hour,  
But those were jocund times! I would that such  
Would visit the old walls again; they look  
As if they had forgotten them.



Of my own purpose.

MANUEL. Reverend father, stop—

I pray you pause.

ABBOT. Why so?

MANUEL. But step this way,

And I will tell you further.

[*Exeunt.*]

## Endnotes

- Note 7: Curse (used jokingly). [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A peak a few miles north of the Jungfrau. [Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *ownership* [Return to reference °](#)

#### SCENE 4

##### *Interior of the Tower.*

MANFRED *alone.*

The stars are forth, the moon above the tops  
Of the snow-shining mountains.—Beautiful!  
I linger yet with Nature, for the night  
Hath been to me a more familiar face  
Than that of man; and in her starry shade  
Of dim and solitary loveliness,  
I learn'd the language of another world.  
I do remember me, that in my youth,  
When I was wandering,—upon such a night  
I stood within the Coliseum's wall,  
Midst the chief relics of almighty Rome;  
The trees which grew along the broken arches  
Waved dark in the blue midnight, and the stars  
Shone through the rents of ruin; from afar  
The watchdog bay'd beyond the Tiber;<sup>9</sup> and  
More near from out the Caesars' palace<sup>1</sup> came  
The owl's long cry, and, interruptedly,  
Of distant sentinels the fitful song  
Begun and died upon the gentle wind.  
Some cypresses beyond the time-worn breach  
Appear'd to skirt the horizon, yet they stood  
Within a bowshot—where the Caesars dwelt,  
And dwell the tuneless birds of night amidst  
A grove which springs through levell'd battlements  
And twines its roots with the imperial hearths.  
Ivy usurps the laurel's place of growth;—  
But the gladiators' bloody Circus<sup>2</sup> stands,  
A noble wreck in ruinous perfection!  
While Caesar's chambers, and the Augustan halls,  
Grovel on earth in indistinct decay.—  
And thou didst shine, thou rolling moon, upon  
All this, and cast a wide and tender light,  
Which soften'd down the hoar austerity

Of rugged desolation, and fill'd up,  
As 'twere anew, the gaps of centuries;  
Leaving that beautiful which still was so,  
And making that which was not, till the place  
Became religion, and the heart ran o'er  
With silent worship of the great of old!—  
The dead, but sceptred sovereigns, who still rule  
Our spirits from their urns.—

'Twas such a night!

'Tis strange that I recall it at this time;  
But I have found our thoughts take wildest flight  
Even at the moment when they should array  
Themselves in pensive order.

*Enter the ABBOT.*

ABBOT. My good lord!  
I crave a second grace for this approach;  
But yet let not my humble zeal offend  
By its abruptness—all it hath of ill  
Recoils on me; its good in the effect  
May light upon your head—could I say *heart*—  
Could I touch *that*, with words or prayers, I should  
Recall a noble spirit which hath wander'd  
But is not yet all lost.

MAN. Thou know'st me not;  
My days are number'd, and my deeds recorded:  
Retire, or 'twill be dangerous—Away!

ABBOT. Thou dost not mean to menace me?

MAN. Not I;  
I simply tell thee peril is at hand,  
And would preserve thee.

ABBOT. What dost thou mean?

MAN. Look there!  
What dost thou see?

ABBOT. Nothing.

MAN. Look there, I say,  
And steadfastly;—now tell me what thou seest?

ABBOT. That which should shake me,—but I fear it not—  
I see a dusk and awful figure rise  
Like an infernal god from out the earth;



His face wrapt in a mantle, and his form  
Robed as with angry clouds: he stands between  
Thyself and me—but I do fear him not.

MAN. Thou hast no cause—he shall not harm thee—but  
His sight may shock thine old limbs into palsy.  
I say to thee—Retire!

ABBOT. And I reply—  
Never—till I have battled with this fiend:—  
What doth he here?

MAN. Why—ay—what doth he here?  
I did not send for him,—he is unbidden.

ABBOT. Alas! lost mortal! what with guests like these  
Hast thou to do? I tremble for thy sake:  
Why doth he gaze on thee, and thou on him?  
Ah! he unveils his aspect: on his brow  
The thunder-scars are graven; from his eye  
Glares forth the immortality of hell—  
Avaunt!—

MAN. Pronounce—what is thy mission?

SPIRIT. Come!

ABBOT. What art thou, unknown being? answer!—speak!

SPIRIT. The genius<sup>3</sup> of this mortal.—Come! 'tis time.

MAN. I am prepared for all things, but deny  
The power which summons me. Who sent thee here?

SPIRIT. Thou'lt know anon—Come! come!

MAN. I have commanded  
Things of an essence greater far than thine,  
And striven with thy masters. Get thee hence!

SPIRIT. Mortal! thine hour is come—Away! I say.

MAN. I knew, and know my hour is come, but not  
To render up my soul to such as thee:  
Away! I'll die as I have lived—alone.

SPIRIT. Then I must summon up my brethren.—Rise!  
[*Other Spirits rise up.*]

ABBOT. Avaunt! ye evil ones!—Avaunt! I say,—  
Ye have no power where piety hath power,  
And I do charge ye in the name—

SPIRIT. Old man!

We know ourselves, our mission, and thine order;  
Waste not thy holy words on idle uses,  
It were in vain: this man is forfeited.

Once more I summon him—Away! away!

MAN. I do defy ye,—though I feel my soul  
Is ebbing from me, yet I do defy ye;  
Nor will I hence, while I have earthly breath  
To breathe my scorn upon ye—earthly strength  
To wrestle, though with spirits; what ye take  
Shall be ta'en limb by limb.

SPIRIT. Reluctant mortal!  
Is this the Magian who would so pervade  
The world invisible, and make himself  
Almost our equal?—Can it be that thou  
Art thus in love with life? the very life  
Which made thee wretched!

MAN. Thou false fiend, thou liest!  
My life is in its last hour,—*that* I know,  
Nor would redeem a moment of that hour;  
I do not combat against death, but thee  
And thy surrounding angels; my past power  
Was purchased by no compact with thy crew,  
But by superior science—penance—daring—  
And length of watching—strength of mind—and skill  
In knowledge of our fathers—when the earth  
Saw men and spirits walking side by side,  
And gave ye no supremacy: I stand  
Upon my strength—I do defy—deny—  
Spurn back, and scorn ye!—

SPIRIT. But thy many crimes  
Have made thee—

MAN. What are they to such as thee?  
Must crimes be punish'd but by other crimes,  
And greater criminals?—Back to thy hell!  
Thou hast no power upon me, *that* I feel;  
Thou never shalt possess me, *that* I know:  
What I have done is done; I bear within  
A torture which could nothing gain from thine:  
The mind which is immortal makes itself

Requital for its good or evil thoughts—  
Is its own origin of ill and end—  
And its own place and time<sup>4</sup>—its innate sense,  
When stripp'd of this mortality, derives  
No colour from the fleeting things without,  
But is absorb'd in sufferance or in joy,  
Born from the knowledge of its own desert.  
Thou didst not tempt me, and thou couldst not tempt me;  
I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey—  
But was my own destroyer, and will be  
My own hereafter.—Back, ye baffled fiends!  
The hand of death is on me—but not yours!

[*The Demons disappear.*]

ABBOT. Alas! how pale thou art—thy lips are white—  
And thy breast heaves—and in thy gasping throat  
The accents rattle—Give thy prayers to heaven—  
Pray—albeit but in thought,—but die not thus.

MAN. 'Tis over—my dull eyes can fix thee not;  
But all things swim around me, and the earth  
Heaves as it were beneath me. Fare thee well—  
Give me thy hand.

ABBOT. Cold—cold—even to the heart—  
But yet one prayer—Alas! how fares it with thee?

MAN. Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die.<sup>5</sup>

[*MANFRED expires.*]

ABBOT. He's gone—his soul hath ta'en its earthless flight—  
Whither? I dread to think—but he is gone.

1816–17

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 9: The river that flows through Rome.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The palace of the Roman emperors. It stands on the Palatine hill, immediately southwest of the Coliseum.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The circular arena within the Coliseum where professional gladiators fought to the death as public entertainment.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: The spirit or deity presiding over a human being from birth. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The last of several echoes by Manfred of Satan's claim that "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, and a Hell of Heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1.254–55). See also lines 1.1.251 and 3.1.70–73. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: When this line was dropped in the printing of the first edition, Byron wrote angrily to his publisher: "You have destroyed the whole effect and moral of the poem by omitting the last line of Manfred's speaking." [Return to reference 5](#)

**Don Juan** Byron began his masterpiece (pronounced in the English fashion, *Don Joó-un*) in July 1818, published it in installments beginning with cantos 1 and 2 in 1819, and continued working on it almost until his death. Initially he improvised the poem from episode to episode. "I *have* no plan," he said, "I *had* no plan; but I had or have materials." The work was composed with remarkable speed (the 888 lines of canto 13, for example, were dashed off within a week), and it aims at the effect of improvisation rather than of artful compression; it asks to be read rapidly, at a conversational pace.

The poem breaks off with the sixteenth canto, but even in its unfinished state *Don Juan* is the longest satirical poem, and indeed one of the longest poems of any kind, in English. Its hero, the Spanish libertine, had in the original legend been superhuman in his sexual energy and wickedness. Throughout Byron's version the unspoken but persistent joke is that this archetypal lady-killer of European legend is in fact more acted upon than active. Unfailingly amiable and well intentioned, he is guilty largely of youth, charm, and a courteous and compliant spirit. The women do all the rest.

The chief models for the poem were the Italian seriocomic versions of medieval chivalric romances; the genre had been introduced by Pulci in the fifteenth century and was adopted by Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso* (1532). From these writers Byron caught the mixed moods and violent oscillations between the sublime and the ridiculous as well as the colloquial management of the complex ottava rima—an eight-line stanza in which the initial interlaced rhymes (*ababab*) build up to the comic turn in the final couplet (*cc*). Byron was influenced in the English use of this Italian form by a mildly amusing poem published in 1817, under the pseudonym of "Whistlecraft," by his friend John Hookham Frere. Other recognizable antecedents of *Don Juan* are Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, both of which had employed the naive traveler as a satiric device, and Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, with its comic exploitation of a narrative medium blatantly subject to the whimsy of the author. But

even the most original literary works play variations on inherited conventions. Shelley at once recognized his friend's poem as "something wholly new and relative to the age."

Byron's literary advisers thought the poem unacceptably immoral, and John Murray took the precaution of printing the first two installments (cantos 1–2, then 3–5) without identifying Byron as the author or himself as the publisher. The eleven completed cantos that followed were, because of Murray's continuing jitters, brought out in 1823–24 by the radical publisher John Hunt. In those cantos Byron's purpose deepened. He set out to create a comic yet devastatingly critical history of the Europe of his own age, sending the impressionable Juan from west to east and back again, from his native Spain to a Russian court (by way of a primitive Greek island and the 1790 siege of the Turkish town of Ismail) and then into the English gentry's country manors. These journeys, which facilitated Byron's satire on almost all existing forms of political organization, would, according to the scheme that he projected for the poem as a whole, ultimately have taken Juan to a death by guillotining in Revolutionary France.

Yet the controlling element of *Don Juan* is not the narrative but the narrator. His running commentary on Juan's misadventures, his reminiscences, and his opinionated remarks on the epoch of political reaction in which he is actually telling Juan's story together add another level to the poem's engagement with history. The narrator's reflections also at the same time lend unity to *Don Juan's* effervescent variety. Tellingly, the poem opens with the first-person pronoun and immediately lets us into the storyteller's predicament: "I want a hero. . . ." The voice then goes on, for almost two thousand stanzas, with effortless volubility and shifts of mood. The poet, who in his brilliant successful youth created the gloomy Byronic hero, in his later and sadder life created a character (not the hero, but the narrator of *Don Juan*) who is one of the great comic inventions in English literature.

# ***FROM DON JUAN***

## **Fragment<sup>1</sup>**

### ***On the back of the Poet's MS. of Canto I***

I would to heaven that I were so much clay,  
As I am blood, bone, marrow, passion, feeling—  
Because at least the past were pass'd away—  
And for the future—(but I write this reeling,  
Having got drunk exceedingly to-day,  
So that I seem to stand upon the ceiling)  
I say—the future is a serious matter—  
And so—for God's sake—hock<sup>o</sup> and soda-water!

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1: This stanza was written on the back of a page of the manuscript of canto I. [Return to reference 1](#)

## **Notes**

- <sup>o</sup>: German wine [Return to reference <sup>o</sup>](#)

# ***From Canto I***

## **[JUAN AND DONNA JULIA]**

### **1**

I want a hero: an uncommon want,  
When every year and month sends forth a new  
one,  
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,  
The age discovers he is not the true one;  
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,  
5 I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan—  
We all have seen him, in the pantomime,<sup>1</sup>  
Sent to the devil somewhat ere his time.

\* \* \*

### **5**

Brave men were living before Agamemnon<sup>2</sup>  
And since, exceeding valorous and sage,  
A good deal like him too, though quite the same  
35 none;  
But then they shone not on the poet's page,  
And so have been forgotten:—I condemn none,  
But can't find any in the present age  
Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one);  
So, as I said, I'll take my friend Don Juan.  
40

### **6**

Most epic poets plunge "in medias res"<sup>3</sup>



(Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),<sup>4</sup>  
And then your hero tells, whene'er you please,  
What went before—by way of episode,  
While seated after dinner at his ease,  
45 Beside his mistress in some soft abode,  
Palace, or garden, paradise, or cavern,  
Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.

## 7

That is the usual method, but not mine—  
My way is to begin with the beginning;  
50 The regularity of my design  
Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,  
And therefore I shall open with a line  
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)  
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father,  
55 And also of his mother, if you'd rather.

## 8

In Seville was he born, a pleasant city,  
Famous for oranges and women—he  
Who has not seen it will be much to pity,  
So says the proverb—and I quite agree;  
60 Of all the Spanish towns is none more pretty,  
Cadiz perhaps—but that you soon may see:—  
Don Juan's parents lived beside the river,  
A noble stream, and call'd the Guadalquivir.

## 9

His father's name was José<sup>5</sup>—*Don*, of course,  
65 A true Hidalgo,<sup>o</sup> free from every stain  
Of Moor or Hebrew blood, he traced his source  
Through the most Gothic gentlemen of Spain;  
A better cavalier ne'er mounted horse,  
Or, being mounted, e'er got down again,

70 Than Jóse, who begot our hero, who  
Begot—but that's to come—Well, to renew:

### 10

His mother was a learned lady, famed  
For every branch of every science known—  
In every Christian language ever named,  
75 With virtues equall'd by her wit alone,  
She made the cleverest people quite ashamed,  
And even the good with inward envy groan,  
Finding themselves so very much exceeded  
In their own way by all the things that she did.

80

### 11

Her memory was a mine: she knew by heart  
All Calderon and greater part of Lopé,<sup>6</sup>  
So that if any actor miss'd his part  
She could have served him for the prompter's  
copy;  
For her Feinagle's<sup>7</sup> were an useless art,  
85 And he himself obliged to shut up shop—he  
Could never make a memory so fine as  
That which adorn'd the brain of Donna Inez.

### 12

Her favourite science was the mathematical,  
Her noblest virtue was her magnanimity,  
90 Her wit (she sometimes tried at wit) was Attic<sup>8</sup> all,  
Her serious sayings darken'd to sublimity;  
In short, in all things she was fairly what I call  
A prodigy—her morning dress was dimity,<sup>9</sup>  
Her evening silk, or, in the summer, muslin,  
95 And other stuffs, with which I won't stay puzzling.

### 13

She knew the Latin—that is, “the Lord’s prayer,”  
And Greek—the alphabet—I’m nearly sure;  
She read some French romances here and there,  
Although her mode of speaking was not pure;  
100 For native Spanish she had no great care,  
At least her conversation was obscure;  
Her thoughts were theorems, her words a problem,  
As if she deem’d that mystery would ennoble ‘em.

\* \* \*

## 22

‘Tis pity learned virgins ever wed  
With persons of no sort of education,  
170 Or gentlemen, who, though well born and bred,  
Grow tired of scientific conversation:  
I don’t choose to say much upon this head,  
I’m a plain man, and in a single station,  
But—Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual,  
175 Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck’d you all?

## 23

Don José and his lady quarrell’d—*why*,  
Not any of the many could divine,  
Though several thousand people chose to try,  
‘Twas surely no concern of theirs nor mine;  
180 I loathe that low vice—curiosity;  
But if there’s any thing in which I shine,  
‘Tis in arranging all my friends’ affairs,  
Not having, of my own, domestic cares.

## 24

And so I interfered, and with the best  
185 Intentions, but their treatment was not kind;  
I think the foolish people were possess’d,

For neither of them could I ever find,  
Although their porter afterwards confess'd—  
But that's no matter, and the worst's behind,  
190 For little Juan o'er me threw, down stairs,  
A pail of housemaid's water unawares.

## 25

A little curly-headed, good-for-nothing,  
And mischief-making monkey from his birth;  
His parents ne'er agreed except in doting  
195 Upon the most unquiet imp on earth;  
Instead of quarrelling, had they been but both in  
Their senses, they'd have sent young master for  
To school, or had him soundly whipp'd at home,  
To teach him manners for the time to come.  
200

## 26

Don José and the Donna Inez led  
For some time an unhappy sort of life,  
Wishing each other, not divorced, but dead;  
They lived respectably as man and wife,  
Their conduct was exceedingly well-bred,  
205 And gave no outward signs of inward strife,  
Until at length the smother'd fire broke out,  
And put the business past all kind of doubt.

## 27

For Inez call'd some druggists, and physicians,  
And tried to prove her loving lord was *mad*,<sup>9</sup>  
210 But as he had some lucid intermissions,  
She next decided he was only *bad*;  
Yet when they ask'd her for her depositions,  
No sort of explanation could be had,  
Save that her duty both to man and God  
Required this conduct—which seem'd very odd.

215

## 28

She kept a journal, where his faults were noted,  
And open'd certain trunks of books and letters,  
All which might, if occasion served, be quoted;  
And then she had all Seville for abettors,  
220 Besides her good old grandmother (who doted);  
The hearers of her case became repeaters,  
Then advocates, inquisitors, and judges,  
Some for amusement, others for old grudges.

## 29

And then this best and meekest woman bore  
225 With such serenity her husband's woes,  
Just as the Spartan ladies did of yore,  
Who saw their spouses kill'd, and nobly chose  
Never to say a word about them more—  
Calmly she heard each calumny that rose,  
230 And saw *his* agonies with such sublimity,  
That all the world exclaim'd, "What magnanimity!

\* \* \*

## 32

Their friends had tried at reconciliation,  
Then their relations, who made matters worse:  
( 'Twere hard to say upon a like occasion  
To whom it may be best to have recourse—  
I can't say much for friend or yet relation):  
The lawyers did their utmost for divorce,  
But scarce a fee was paid on either side  
255 Before, unluckily, Don José died.

## 33

He died: and most unluckily, because,  
According to all hints I could collect  
From counsel learned in those kinds of laws,  
(Although their talk's obscure and circumspect)  
260 His death contrived to spoil a charming cause;  
A thousand pities also with respect  
To public feeling, which on this occasion  
Was manifested in a great sensation.

\* \* \*

### 37

Dying intestate, Juan was sole heir  
290 To a chancery suit, and messuages, and lands,  
Which, with a long minority and care,  
Promised to turn out well in proper hands:  
Inez became sole guardian, which was fair,  
And answer'd but to nature's just demands;  
295 An only son left with an only mother  
Is brought up much more wisely than another.

### 38

Sagest of women, even of widows, she  
Resolved that Juan should be quite a paragon,  
And worthy of the noblest pedigree:  
(His sire was of Castile, his dam from Aragon.)  
300 Then for accomplishments of chivalry,  
In case our lord the king should go to war again,  
He learn'd the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery,  
And how to scale a fortress—or a nunnery.

### 39

305 But that which Donna Inez most desired,  
And saw into herself each day before all

The learned tutors whom for him she hired,  
Was, that his breeding should be strictly moral:  
Much into all his studies she enquired,  
310 And so they were submitted first to her, all,  
Arts, sciences, no branch was made a mystery  
To Juan's eyes, excepting natural history.<sup>2</sup>

#### 40

The languages, especially the dead,  
The sciences, and most of all the abstruse,  
The arts, at least all such as could be said  
315 To be the most remote from common use,  
In all these he was much and deeply read;  
But not a page of any thing that's loose,  
Or hints continuation of the species,  
Was ever suffer'd, lest he should grow vicious.  
320

#### 41

His classic studies made a little puzzle,  
Because of filthy loves of gods and goddesses,  
Who in the earlier ages made a bustle,  
But never put on pantaloons or bodices;  
His reverend tutors had at times a tussle,  
325 And for their Aeneids, Iliads, and Odysseys,  
Were forced to make an odd sort of apology,  
For Donna Inez dreaded the Mythology.

#### 42

Ovid's a rake, as half his verses show him,  
Anacreon's morals are a still worse sample,  
330 Catullus scarcely has a decent poem,  
I don't think Sappho's Ode a good example,  
Although Longinus<sup>3</sup> tells us there is no hymn  
Where the sublime soars forth on wings more  
ample;

335 But Virgil's songs are pure, except that horrid one  
Beginning with "Formosum Pastor Corydon."<sup>4</sup>

### 43

Lucretius' irreligion<sup>5</sup> is too strong  
For early stomachs, to prove wholesome food;  
I can't help thinking Juvenal<sup>6</sup> was wrong,  
340 Although no doubt his real intent was good,  
For speaking out so plainly in his song,  
So much indeed as to be downright rude;  
And then what proper person can be partial  
To all those nauseous epigrams of Martial?

### 44

Juan was taught from out the best edition,  
345 Expurgated by learned men, who place,  
Judiciously, from out the schoolboy's vision,  
The grosser parts; but fearful to deface  
Too much their modest bard by this omission,  
And pitying sore his mutilated case,  
350 They only add them all in an appendix,<sup>7</sup>  
Which saves, in fact, the trouble of an index;

\* \* \*

### 52

For my part I say nothing—nothing—but  
410 *This* I will say—my reasons are my own—  
That if I had an only son to put  
To school (as God be praised that I have none),  
'Tis not with Donna Inez I would shut  
Him up to learn his catechism alone,  
No—no—I'd send him out betimes to college,  
415 For there it was I pick'd up my own knowledge.



### 53

For there one learns—'tis not for me to boast,  
Though I acquired—but I pass over *that*,  
As well as all the Greek I since have lost:

420 I say that there's the place—but "*Verbum sat*,"<sup>8</sup>  
I think I pick'd up too, as well as most,  
Knowledge of matters—but no matter *what*—  
I never married—but, I think, I know  
That sons should not be educated so.

### 54

425 Young Juan now was sixteen years of age,  
Tall, handsome, slender, but well knit: he seem'd  
Active, though not so sprightly, as a page;  
And every body but his mother deem'd  
Him almost man; but she flew in a rage  
430 And bit her lips (for else she might have scream'd)  
If any said so, for to be precocious  
Was in her eyes a thing the most atrocious.

### 55

Amongst her numerous acquaintance, all  
Selected for discretion and devotion,  
435 There was the Donna Julia, whom to call  
Pretty were but to give a feeble notion  
Of many charms in her as natural  
As sweetness to the flower, or salt to ocean,  
Her zone to Venus,<sup>9</sup> or his bow to Cupid,  
(But this last simile is trite and stupid.)  
440

### 56

The darkness of her Oriental eye  
Accorded with her Moorish origin;  
(Her blood was not all Spanish, by the by;

In Spain, you know, this is a sort of sin.)  
When proud Granada fell, and, forced to fly,  
445 Boabdil wept,<sup>1</sup> of Donna Julia's kin  
Some went to Africa, some stay'd in Spain,  
Her great great grandmamma chose to remain.

## 57

She married (I forget the pedigree)  
With an Hidalgo, who transmitted down  
450 His blood less noble than such blood should be;  
At such alliances his sires would frown,  
In that point so precise in each degree  
That they bred *in and in*, as might be shown,  
Marrying their cousins—nay, their aunts, and nieces,  
455 Which always spoils the breed, if it increases.

## 58

This heathenish cross restored the breed again,  
Ruin'd its blood, but much improved its flesh;  
For from a root the ugliest in Old Spain  
Sprung up a branch as beautiful as fresh;  
460 The sons no more were short, the daughters plain:  
But there's a rumour which I fain would hush,  
'Tis said that Donna Julia's grandmamma  
Produced her Don more heirs at love than law.

## 59

However this might be, the race<sup>o</sup> went on  
465 Improving still through every generation,  
Until it centred in an only son,  
Who left an only daughter; my narration  
May have suggested that this single one  
Could be but Julia (whom on this occasion  
470 I shall have much to speak about), and she  
Was married, charming, chaste,<sup>2</sup> and twenty-three.

## 60

Her eye (I'm very fond of handsome eyes)  
Was large and dark, suppressing half its fire  
Until she spoke, then through its soft disguise  
475 Flash'd an expression more of pride than ire,  
And love than either; and there would arise  
A something in them which was not desire,  
But would have been, perhaps, but for the soul  
Which struggled through and chasten'd down the  
480 whole.

## 61

Her glossy hair was cluster'd o'er a brow  
Bright with intelligence, and fair, and smooth;  
Her eyebrow's shape was like th' aërial bow,  
Her cheek all purple with the beam of youth,  
485 Mounting, at times, to a transparent glow,  
As if her veins ran lightning; she, in sooth,  
Possess'd an air and grace by no means common:  
Her stature tall—I hate a dumpy woman.

## 62

Wedded she was some years, and to a man  
Of fifty, and such husbands are in plenty;  
490 And yet, I think, instead of such a ONE  
'Twere better to have two of five-and-twenty,  
Especially in countries near the sun:  
And now I think on't, "mi vien in mente,"<sup>3</sup>  
Ladies even of the most uneasy virtue  
495 Prefer a spouse whose age is short of thirty.

## 63

'Tis a sad thing, I cannot choose but say,  
And all the fault of that indecent sun,

Who cannot leave alone our helpless clay,  
But will keep baking, broiling, burning on,  
500 That howsoever people fast and pray,  
The flesh is frail, and so the soul undone:  
What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,  
Is much more common where the climate's sultry.

## 64

Happy the nations of the moral North!  
505 Where all is virtue, and the winter season  
Sends sin, without a rag on, shivering forth  
( 'Twas snow that brought St. Francis back to  
reason);  
Where juries cast up what a wife is worth,  
By laying whate'er sum, in mulct,<sup>4</sup> they please on  
510 The lover, who must pay a handsome price,  
Because it is a marketable vice.

## 65

Alfonso was the name of Julia's lord,  
A man well looking for his years, and who  
Was neither much beloved nor yet abhorr'd:  
515 They lived together, as most people do,  
Suffering each other's foibles by accord,  
And not exactly either *one* or *two*;  
Yet he was jealous, though he did not show it,  
For jealousy dislikes the world to know it.  
520

\* \* \*

## 69

Juan she saw, and, as a pretty child,  
545 Caress'd him often—such a thing might be  
Quite innocently done, and harmless styled,

When she had twenty years, and thirteen he;  
But I am not so sure I should have smiled  
When he was sixteen, Julia twenty-three;  
550 These few short years make wondrous alterations,  
Particularly amongst sun-burnt nations.

## 70

Whate'er the cause might be, they had become  
Changed; for the dame grew distant, the youth  
shy,  
555 Their looks cast down, their greetings almost dumb,  
And much embarrassment in either eye;  
There surely will be little doubt with some  
That Donna Julia knew the reason why,  
But as for Juan, he had no more notion  
560 Than he who never saw the sea of ocean.

## 71

Yet Julia's very coldness still was kind,  
And tremulously gentle her small hand  
Withdrew itself from his, but left behind  
A little pressure, thrilling, and so bland  
565 And slight, so very slight, that to the mind  
'Twas but a doubt; but ne'er magician's wand  
Wrought change with all Armida's<sup>5</sup> fairy art  
Like what this light touch left on Juan's heart.

## 72

And if she met him, though she smiled no more,  
570 She look'd a sadness sweeter than her smile,  
As if her heart had deeper thoughts in store  
She must not own, but cherish'd more the while  
For that compression in its burning core;  
Even innocence itself has many a wile,  
And will not dare to trust itself with truth,

575 And love is taught hypocrisy from youth.

\* \* \*

## 75

Poor Julia's heart was in an awkward state;  
She felt it going, and resolved to make  
The noblest efforts for herself and mate,  
595 For honour's, pride's, religion's, virtue's sake;  
Her resolutions were most truly great,  
And almost might have made a Tarquin<sup>6</sup> quake:  
She pray'd the Virgin Mary for her grace,  
As being the best judge of a lady's case.  
600

## 76

She vow'd she never would see Juan more,  
And next day paid a visit to his mother,  
And look'd extremely at the opening door,  
Which, by the Virgin's grace, let in another;  
Grateful she was, and yet a little sore—  
605 Again it opens, it can be no other,  
'Tis surely Juan now—No! I'm afraid  
That night the Virgin was no further pray'd.

## 77

She now determined that a virtuous woman  
Should rather face and overcome temptation,  
610 That flight was base and dastardly, and no man  
Should ever give her heart the least sensation;  
That is to say, a thought beyond the common  
Preference, that we must feel upon occasion,  
For people who are pleasanter than others,  
615 But then they only seem so many brothers.

## 78

And even if by chance—and who can tell?  
The devil's so very sly—she should discover  
That all within was not so very well,  
And, if still free, that such or such a lover  
620 Might please perhaps, a virtuous wife can quell  
Such thoughts, and be the better when they're  
over;  
And if the man should ask, 'tis but denial:  
I recommend young ladies to make trial.

## 79

And then there are such things as love divine,  
625 Bright and immaculate, unmix'd and pure,  
Such as the angels think so very fine,  
And matrons, who would be no less secure,  
Platonic, perfect, "just such love as mine:"  
Thus Julia said—and thought so, to be sure;  
630 And so I'd have her think, were I the man  
On whom her reveries celestial ran.

\* \* \*

## 86

So much for Julia. Now we'll turn to Juan,  
Poor little fellow! he had no idea  
Of his own case, and never hit the true one;  
In feelings quick as Ovid's Miss Medea,<sup>[Z](#)</sup>  
He puzzled over what he found a new one,  
685 But not as yet imagined it could be a  
Thing quite in course, and not at all alarming,  
Which, with a little patience, might grow charming.

\* \* \*

## 90

Young Juan wander'd by the glassy brooks  
Thinking unutterable things; he threw  
Himself at length within the leafy nooks  
715 Where the wild branch of the cork forest grew;  
There poets find materials for their books,  
And every now and then we read them through,  
So that their plan and prosody are eligible,  
Unless, like Wordsworth, they prove unintelligible.  
720

### 91

He, Juan, (and not Wordsworth) so pursued  
His self-communion with his own high soul,  
Until his mighty heart, in its great mood,  
Had mitigated part, though not the whole  
Of its disease; he did the best he could  
725 With things not very subject to control,  
And turn'd, without perceiving his condition,  
Like Coleridge, into a metaphysician.

### 92

He thought about himself, and the whole earth,  
Of man the wonderful, and of the stars,  
730 And how the deuce they ever could have birth;  
And then he thought of earthquakes, and of wars,  
How many miles the moon might have in girth,  
Of air-balloons, and of the many bars  
To perfect knowledge of the boundless skies;—  
735 And then he thought of Donna Julia's eyes.

### 93

In thoughts like these true wisdom may discern  
Longings sublime, and aspirations high,  
Which some are born with, but the most part learn  
To plague themselves withal, they know not why:  
740



'Twas strange that one so young should thus  
concern

His brain about the action of the sky;  
Do *you* think 'twas philosophy that this did,  
I can't help thinking puberty assisted.

## 94

745 He pored upon the leaves, and on the flowers,  
And heard a voice in all the winds; and then  
He thought of wood-nymphs and immortal bowers,  
And how the goddesses came down to men:  
He miss'd the pathway, he forgot the hours,  
750 And when he look'd upon his watch again,  
He found how much old Time had been a winner—  
He also found that he had lost his dinner.

\* \* \*

## 103

'Twas on a summer's day—the sixth of June:—  
I like to be particular in dates,  
Not only of the age, and year, but moon;  
820 They are a sort of post-house, where the Fates  
Change horses, making history change its tune,  
Then spur away o'er empires and o'er states,  
Leaving at last not much besides chronology,  
Excepting the post-obits<sup>8</sup> of theology.

## 104

825 'Twas on the sixth of June, about the hour  
Of half-past six—perhaps still nearer seven—  
When Julia sate within as pretty a bower  
As e'er held houri in that heathenish heaven  
Described by Mahomet, and Anacreon Moore,<sup>9</sup>

830 To whom the lyre and laurels have been given,  
With all the trophies of triumphant song—  
He won them well, and may he wear them long!

### 105

She sate, but not alone; I know not well  
How this same interview had taken place,  
And even if I knew, I should not tell—  
835 People should hold their tongues in any case;  
No matter how or why the thing befell,  
But there were she and Juan, face to face—  
When two such faces are so, 'twould be wise,  
But very difficult, to shut their eyes.  
840

### 106

How beautiful she look'd! her conscious<sup>1</sup> heart  
Glow'd in her cheek, and yet she felt no wrong.  
Oh Love! how perfect is thy mystic art,  
Strengthening the weak, and trampling on the  
strong,  
How self-deceitful is the sagest part  
845 Of mortals whom thy lure hath led along—  
The precipice she stood on was immense,  
So was her creed<sup>o</sup> in her own innocence.

### 107

She thought of her own strength, and Juan's youth  
And of the folly of all prudish fears,  
850 Victorious virtue, and domestic truth,  
And then of Don Alfonso's fifty years:  
I wish these last had not occur'd, in sooth,  
Because that number rarely much endears,  
And through all climes, the snowy and the sunny,  
855 Sounds ill in love, whate'er it may in money.

\* \* \*

### 113

The sun set, and up rose the yellow moon:  
The devil's in the moon for mischief; they  
Who call'd her chaste, methinks, began too soon  
900 Their nomenclature; there is not a day,  
The longest, not the twenty-first of June,  
Sees half the business in a wicked way  
On which three single hours of moonshine smile—  
And then she looks so modest all the while.

### 114

905 There is a dangerous silence in that hour,  
A stillness, which leaves room for the full soul  
To open all itself, without the power  
Of calling wholly back its self-control;  
The silver light which, hallowing tree and tower,  
910 Sheds beauty and deep softness o'er the whole,  
Breathes also to the heart, and o'er it throws  
A loving languor, which is not repose.

### 115

And Julia sate with Juan, half embraced  
And half retiring from the glowing arm,  
Which trembled like the bosom where 'twas placed;  
915 Yet still she must have thought there was no  
harm,  
Or else 'twere easy to withdraw her waist;  
But then the situation had its charm,  
And then—God knows what next—I can't go on;  
920 I'm almost sorry that I e'er begun.

### 116

Oh Plato! Plato! you have paved the way,

With your confounded fantasies, to more  
Immoral conduct by the fancied sway  
Your system feigns o'er the controulless core  
Of human hearts, than all the long array  
925 Of poets and romancers:—You're a bore,  
A charlatan, a coxcomb—and have been,  
At best, no better than a go-between.

### 117

And Julia's voice was lost, except in sighs,  
Until too late for useful conversation;  
930 The tears were gushing from her gentle eyes,  
I wish, indeed, they had not had occasion,  
But who, alas! can love, and then be wise?  
Not that remorse did not oppose temptation,  
A little still she strove, and much repented,  
935 And whispering "I will ne'er consent"—consented.

\* \* \*

### 126

'Tis sweet to win, no matter how, one's laurels,  
By blood or ink; 'tis sweet to put an end  
To strife; 'tis sometimes sweet to have our quarrels,  
Particularly with a tiresome friend:  
Sweet is old wine in bottles, ale in barrels;  
1005 Dear is the helpless creature we defend  
Against the world; and dear the schoolboy spot  
We ne'er forget, though there we are forgot.

### 127

But sweeter still than this, than these, than all,  
Is first and passionate love—it stands alone,  
1010 Like Adam's recollection of his fall;

The tree of knowledge has been pluck'd—all's  
known—  
And life yields nothing further to recall  
Worthy of this ambrosial sin, so shown,  
No doubt in fable, as the unforgiven  
1015 Fire which Prometheus<sup>2</sup> filch'd for us from heaven.

\* \* \*

### 133

Man's a phenomenon, one knows not what,  
And wonderful beyond all wondrous measure;  
'Tis pity though, in this sublime world, that  
Pleasure's a sin, and sometimes sin's a pleasure;  
1060 Few mortals know what end they would be at,  
But whether glory, power, or love, or treasure,  
The path is through perplexing ways, and when  
The goal is gain'd, we die, you know—and then—

### 134

What then?—I do not know, no more do you—  
1065 And so good night.—Return we to our story:  
'Twas in November, when fine days are few,  
And the far mountains wax a little hoary,  
And clap a white cape on their mantles blue;  
And the sea dashes round the promontory,  
1070 And the loud breaker boils against the rock,  
And sober suns must set at five o'clock.

### 135

'Twas, as the watchmen say, a cloudy night;  
No moon, no stars, the wind was low or loud  
By gusts, and many a sparkling hearth was bright  
1075

With the piled wood, round which the family  
crowd;  
There's something cheerful in that sort of light,  
Even as a summer sky's without a cloud:  
I'm fond of fire, and crickets, and all that,  
A lobster salad, and champagne, and chat.  
1080

### 136

'Twas midnight—Donna Julia was in bed,  
Sleeping, most probably,—when at her door  
Arose a clatter might awake the dead,  
If they had never been awake before,  
And that they have been so we all have read,  
1085 And are to be so, at the least, once more;—  
The door was fasten'd, but with voice and fist  
First knocks were heard, then "Madam—Madam—  
hist!

### 137

"For God's sake, Madam—Madam—here's my master,  
With more than half the city at his back—  
1090 Was ever heard of such a curst disaster!  
'Tis not my fault—I kept good watch—Alack!  
Do pray undo the bolt a little faster—  
They're on the stair just now, and in a crack<sup>o</sup>  
Will all be here; perhaps he yet may fly—  
1095 Surely the window's not so *very* high!"

### 138

By this time Don Alfonso was arrived,  
With torches, friends, and servants in great  
number;  
The major part of them had long been wived,  
And therefore paused not to disturb the slumber  
1100 Of any wicked woman, who contrived

By stealth her husband's temples to encumber:<sup>3</sup>  
Examples of this kind are so contagious.  
Were *one* not punish'd, *all* would be outrageous.

### 139

1105 I can't tell how, or why, or what suspicion  
Could enter into Don Alfonso's head;  
But for a cavalier of his condition<sup>o</sup>  
It surely was exceedingly ill-bred,  
Without a word of previous admonition,  
1110 To hold a levee<sup>4</sup> round his lady's bed,  
And summon lackeys, arm'd with fire and sword,  
To prove himself the thing he most abhorr'd.

### 140

Poor Donna Julia! starting as from sleep,  
(Mind—that I do not say—she had not slept)  
Began at once to scream, and yawn, and weep;  
1115 Her maid Antonia, who was an adept,  
Contrived to fling the bed-clothes in a heap,  
As if she had just now from out them crept:  
I can't tell why she should take all this trouble  
To prove her mistress had been sleeping double.  
1120

### 141

But Julia mistress, and Antonia maid,  
Appear'd like two poor harmless women, who  
Of goblins, but still more of men afraid,  
Had thought one man might be deterr'd by two,  
And therefore side by side were gently laid,  
1125 Until the hours of absence should run through,  
And truant husband should return, and say,  
"My dear, I was the first who came away."

### 142

Now Julia found at length a voice, and cried,  
1130 "In heaven's name, Don Alfonso, what d' ye  
mean?  
Has madness seized you? would that I had died  
Ere such a monster's victim I had been!  
What may this midnight violence betide,  
A sudden fit of drunkenness or spleen?  
1135 Dare you suspect me, whom the thought would kill?  
Search, then, the room!"—Alfonso said, "I will."

### 143

*He* search'd, *they* search'd, and rummaged every  
where,  
Closet and clothes' press, chest and window-seat,  
And found much linen, lace, and several pair  
1140 Of stockings, slippers, brushes, combs, complete,  
With other articles of ladies fair,  
To keep them beautiful, or leave them neat:  
Arras<sup>5</sup> they prick'd and curtains with their swords,  
And wounded several shutters, and some boards.

### 144

1145 Under the bed they search'd, and there they found<sup>6</sup>  
—  
No matter what—it was not that they sought;  
They open'd windows, gazing if the ground  
Had signs or footmarks, but the earth said nought;  
And then they stared each others' faces round:  
1150 'T is odd, not one of all these seekers thought,  
And seems to me almost a sort of blunder,  
Of looking *in* the bed as well as under.

### 145

During this inquisition, Julia's tongue



Was not asleep—"Yes, search and search," she  
cried,  
1155 "Insult on insult heap, and wrong on wrong!  
It was for this that I became a bride!  
For this in silence I have suffer'd long  
A husband like Alfonso at my side;  
But now I'll bear no more, nor here remain,  
1160 If there be law, or lawyers, in all Spain.

### 146

"Yes, Don Alfonso! husband now no more,  
If ever you indeed deserved the name,  
Is't worthy of your years?—you have threescore—  
Fifty, or sixty, it is all the same—  
Is't wise or fitting, causeless to explore  
1165 For facts against a virtuous woman's fame?  
Ungrateful, perjured, barbarous Don Alfonso,  
How dare you think your lady would go on so?"

\* \* \*

### 159

The Senhor Don Alfonso stood confused;  
1265 Antonia bustled round the ransack'd room,  
And, turning up her nose, with looks abused  
Her master, and his myrmidons,<sup>7</sup> of whom  
Not one, except the attorney, was amused;  
1270 He, like Achates,<sup>8</sup> faithful to the tomb,  
So there were quarrels, cared not for the cause,  
Knowing they must be settled by the laws.

### 160

With prying snub-nose, and small eyes, he stood,  
Following Antonia's motions here and there,

1275 With much suspicion in his attitude;  
For reputations he had little care;  
So that a suit or action were made good,  
Small pity had he for the young and fair,  
And ne'er believed in negatives, till these  
1280 Were proved by competent false witnesses.

### 161

But Don Alfonso stood with downcast looks,  
And, truth to say, he made a foolish figure;  
When, after searching in five hundred nooks,  
And treating a young wife with so much rigour,  
1285 He gain'd no point, except some self-rebukes,  
Added to those his lady with such vigour  
Had pour'd upon him for the last half-hour,  
Quick, thick, and heavy—as a thunder-shower.

### 162

At first he tried to hammer an excuse,  
To which the sole reply was tears, and sobs,  
1290 And indications of hysterics, whose  
Prologue is always certain throes, and throbs,  
Gasps, and whatever else the owners choose:  
Alfonso saw his wife, and thought of Job's;<sup>9</sup>  
He saw too, in perspective, her relations,  
1295 And then he tried to muster all his patience.

### 163

He stood in act to speak, or rather stammer,  
But sage Antonia cut him short before  
The anvil of his speech received the hammer,  
With "Pray, sir, leave the room, and say no more,  
1300 Or madam dies."—Alfonso mutter'd, "D—n her,"  
But nothing else, the time of words was o'er;  
He cast a rueful look or two, and did,

He knew not wherefore, that which he was bid.

### 164

1305 With him retired his "*posse comitatus*,"<sup>1</sup>  
The attorney last, who linger'd near the door,  
Reluctantly, still tarrying there as late as  
Antonia let him—not a little sore  
At this most strange and unexplain'd "*hiatus*"  
1310 In Don Alfonso's facts, which just now wore  
An awkward look; as he revolved the case,  
The door was fasten'd in his legal face.

### 165

No sooner was it bolted, than—Oh shame!  
Oh sin! Oh sorrow! and Oh womankind!  
How can you do such things and keep your fame,  
1315 Unless this world, and t'other too, be blind?  
Nothing so dear as an unfilch'd good name!  
But to proceed—for there is more behind:  
With much heartfelt reluctance be it said,  
Young Juan slipp'd, half-smother'd, from the bed.  
1320

### 166

He had been hid—I don't pretend to say  
How, nor can I indeed describe the where—  
Young, slender, and pack'd easily, he lay,  
No doubt, in little compass, round or square;  
But pity him I neither must nor may  
1325 His suffocation by that pretty pair;  
'Twere better, sure, to die so, than be shut  
With maudlin Clarence in his Malmsey butt.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

## 169

1345 What's to be done? Alfonso will be back  
The moment he has sent his fools away.  
Antonia's skill was put upon the rack,  
But no device could be brought into play—  
And how to parry the renew'd attack?  
1350 Besides, it wanted but few hours of day:  
Antonia puzzled; Julia did not speak,  
But press'd her bloodless lip to Juan's cheek.

## 170

He turn'd his lip to hers, and with his hand  
Call'd back the tangles of her wandering hair;  
1355 Even then their love they could not all command,  
And half forgot their danger and despair:  
Antonia's patience now was at a stand—  
"Come, come, 'tis no time now for fooling there,"  
She whisper'd, in great wrath—"I must deposit  
1360 This pretty gentleman within the closet:"

\* \* \*

## 173

Now, Don Alfonso entering, but alone,  
Closed the oration of the trusty maid:  
She loiter'd, and he told her to be gone,  
1380 An order somewhat sullenly obey'd;  
However, present remedy was none,  
And no great good seem'd answer'd if she staid:  
Regarding both with slow and sidelong view,  
She snuff'd the candle, curtsied, and withdrew.

## 174

Alfonso paused a minute—then begun

1385       Some strange excuses for his late proceeding;  
He would not justify what he had done,  
          To say the best, it was extreme ill-breeding;  
But there were ample reasons for it, none  
          Of which he specified in this his pleading:  
1390       His speech was a fine sample, on the whole,  
Of rhetoric, which the learn'd call "*rigmarole*."

\* \* \*

### 180

Alfonso closed his speech, and begg'd her pardon,  
Which Julia half withheld, and then half granted,  
And laid conditions, he thought, very hard on,  
1435       Denying several little things he wanted:  
He stood like Adam lingering near his garden,  
          With useless penitence perplex'd and haunted,  
Beseeching she no further would refuse,  
When, lo! he stumbled o'er a pair of shoes.  
1440

### 181

A pair of shoes!—what then? not much, if they  
Are such as fit with ladies' feet, but these  
(No one can tell how much I grieve to say)  
Were masculine; to see them, and to seize,  
Was but a moment's act.—Ah! well-a-day!  
1445       My teeth begin to chatter, my veins freeze—  
Alfonso first examined well their fashion,  
And then flew out into another passion.

### 182

He left the room for his relinquish'd sword,  
And Julia instant to the closet flew.  
1450       "Fly, Juan, fly! for heaven's sake—not a word—  
The door is open—you may yet slip through

The passage you so often have explored—  
Here is the garden-key—Fly—fly—Adieu!  
Haste—haste! I hear Alfonso's hurrying feet—  
1455 Day has not broke—there's no one in the street."

### 183

None can say that this was not good advice,  
The only mischief was, it came too late;  
Of all experience 'tis the usual price,  
A sort of income-tax laid on by fate:  
1460 Juan had reach'd the room-door in a trice,  
And might have done so by the garden-gate,  
But met Alfonso in his dressing-gown,  
Who threaten'd death—so Juan knock'd him down.

### 184

Dire was the scuffle, and out went the light;  
1465 Antonia cried out "Rape!" and Julia "Fire!"  
But not a servant stirr'd to aid the fight.  
Alfonso, pommell'd to his heart's desire,  
Swore lustily he'd be revenged this night;  
And Juan, too, blasphemed an octave higher;  
1470 His blood was up: though young, he was a Tartar,<sup>3</sup>  
And not at all disposed to prove a martyr.

### 185

Alfonso's sword had dropp'd ere he could draw it,  
And they continued battling hand to hand,  
For Juan very luckily ne'er saw it;  
1475 His temper not being under great command,  
If at that moment he had chanced to claw it,  
Alfonso's days had not been in the land  
Much longer.—Think of husbands', lovers' lives!  
And how ye may be doubly widows—wives!

## 186

1480 Alfonso grappled to detain the foe,  
And Juan throttled him to get away,  
And blood ('twas from the nose) began to flow;  
At last, as they more faintly wrestling lay,  
Juan contrived to give an awkward blow,  
1485 And then his only garment quite gave way;  
He fled, like Joseph,<sup>4</sup> leaving it; but there,  
I doubt, all likeness ends between the pair.

## 187

Lights came at length, and men, and maids, who  
found  
An awkward spectacle their eyes before;  
1490 Antonia in hysterics, Julia swoon'd,  
Alfonso leaning, breathless, by the door;  
Some half-torn drapery scatter'd on the ground,  
Some blood, and several footsteps, but no more:  
Juan the gate gain'd, turn'd the key about,  
1495 And liking not the inside, lock'd the out.

## 188

Here ends this canto.—Need I sing, or say,  
How Juan, naked, favour'd by the night,  
Who favours what she should not, found his way,  
And reach'd his home in an unseemly plight?  
1500 The pleasant scandal which arose next day,  
The nine days' wonder which was brought to light,  
And how Alfonso sued for a divorce,  
Were in the English newspapers, of course.

## 189

1505 If you would like to see the whole proceedings,  
The depositions, and the cause at full,

The names of all the witnesses, the pleadings  
Of counsel to nonsuit,<sup>5</sup> or to annul,  
There's more than one edition, and the readings  
Are various, but they none of them are dull;  
1510 The best is that in short-hand ta'en by Gurney,<sup>6</sup>  
Who to Madrid on purpose made a journey.

## 190

But Donna Inez, to divert the train  
Of one of the most circulating scandals  
That had for centuries been known in Spain,  
1515 Since Roderic's Goths, or older Genseric's  
Vandals,<sup>7</sup>  
First vow'd (and never had she vow'd in vain)  
To Virgin Mary several pounds of candles;  
And then, by the advice of some old ladies,  
1520 She sent her son to be embark'd at Cadiz.

## 191

She had resolved that he should travel through  
All European climes, by land or sea,  
To mend his former morals, or get new,  
Especially in France and Italy  
(At least this is the thing most people do).  
1525 Julia was sent into a nunnery  
And there, perhaps, her feelings may be better  
Shown in the following copy of her letter:—

## 192

"They tell me 'tis decided; you depart:  
'Tis wise—'tis well, but not the less a pain;  
1530 I have no further claim on your young heart,  
Mine is the victim, and would be again;  
To love too much has been the only art



I used;—I write in haste, and if a stain  
Be on this sheet, 'tis not what it appears;  
1535 My eyeballs burn and throb, but have no tears.

### 193

"I loved, I love you, for that love have lost  
State, station, heaven, mankind's, my own  
esteem,  
And yet can not regret what it hath cost,  
So dear is still the memory of that dream;  
1540 Yet, if I name my guilt, 'tis not to boast,  
None can deem harshlier of me than I deem:  
I trace this scrawl because I cannot rest—  
I've nothing to reproach, nor to request.

### 194

"Man's love is of his life a thing apart,  
1545 'Tis woman's whole existence; man may range  
The court, camp, church, the vessel, and the mart,  
Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange  
Pride, fame, ambition, to fill up his heart,  
And few there are whom these can not estrange;  
1550 Men have all these resources, we but one,  
To love again, and be again undone.

### 195

"My breast has been all weakness, is so yet;  
I struggle, but cannot collect my mind;  
My blood still rushes where my spirit's set,  
1555 As roll the waves before the settled wind;  
My brain is feminine, nor can forget—  
To all, except your image, madly blind;  
As turns the needle<sup>8</sup> trembling to the pole  
It ne'er can reach, so turns to you, my soul.

1560

## 196

"You will proceed in beauty, and in pride,  
Beloved and loving many; all is o'er  
For me on earth, except some years to hide  
My shame and sorrow deep in my heart's core;  
These I could bear, but cannot cast aside  
1565 The passion which still rages as before,—  
And so farewell—forgive me, love me—No,  
That word is idle now—but let it go.

## 197

"I have no more to say, but linger still,  
And dare not set my seal upon this sheet,  
1570 And yet I may as well the task fulfil,  
My misery can scarce be more complete:  
I had not lived till now, could sorrow kill;  
Death flies the wretch who fain the blow would  
meet,  
And I must even survive this last adieu,  
1575 And bear with life, to love and pray for you!"

## 198

This note was written upon gilt-edged paper  
With a neat crow-quill, rather hard, but new;  
Her small white fingers scarce could reach the  
taper,<sup>9</sup>  
But trembled as magnetic needles do,  
1580 And yet she did not let one tear escape her;  
The seal a sun-flower; "*Elle vous suit partout*,"<sup>1</sup>  
The motto, cut upon a white cornelian;  
The wax was superfine, its hue vermilion.

## 199

1585 This was Don Juan's earliest scrape; but whether  
I shall proceed with his adventures is  
Dependent on the public altogether;  
We'll see, however, what they say to this,  
Their favour in an author's cap's a feather,  
And no great mischief's done by their caprice;  
1590 And if their approbation we experience,  
Perhaps they'll have some more about a year hence.

## 200

My poem's epic, and is meant to be  
Divided in twelve books; each book containing,  
With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,  
1595 A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,  
New characters; the episodes are three:  
A panoramic view of hell's in training,  
After the style of Virgil and of Homer,  
So that my name of Epic's no misnomer.  
1600

## 201

All these things will be specified in time,  
With strict regard to Aristotle's rules,  
The *Vade Mecum*<sup>2</sup> of the true sublime,  
Which makes so many poets, and some fools:  
Prose poets like blank-verse, I'm fond of rhyme,  
1605 Good workmen never quarrel with their tools;  
I've got new mythological machinery,<sup>3</sup>  
And very handsome supernatural scenery.

## 202

There's only one slight difference between  
Me and my epic brethren gone before,  
1610 And here the advantage is my own, I ween;  
(Not that I have not several merits more,  
But this will more peculiarly be seen;)

1615        They so embellish, that 'tis quite a bore  
Their labyrinth of fables to thread through,  
Whereas this story's actually true.

### 203

1620        If any person doubt it, I appeal  
            To history, tradition, and to facts,  
To newspapers, whose truth all know and feel,  
            To plays in five, and operas in three acts;  
All these confirm my statement a good deal,  
            But that which more completely faith exacts  
Is, that myself, and several now in Seville,  
Saw Juan's last elopement with the devil.<sup>4</sup>

### 204

1625        If ever I should condescend to prose,  
            I'll write poetical commandments, which  
Shall supersede beyond all doubt all those  
            That went before; in these I shall enrich  
My text with many things that no one knows,  
            And carry precept to the highest pitch:  
1630        I'll call the work "Longinus o'er a Bottle,  
Or, Every Poet his *own* Aristotle."

### 205

            Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;<sup>5</sup>  
            Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge,  
            Southey;  
1635        Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,  
            The second drunk, the third so quaint and  
            mouthy:  
With Crabbe<sup>6</sup> it may be difficult to cope,  
            And Campbell's Hippocrene<sup>7</sup> is somewhat drouthy:  
Thou shalt not steal from Samuel Rogers, nor

1640 Commit—flirtation with the muse of Moore.<sup>8</sup>

## 206

Thou shalt not covet Mr. Sotheby's<sup>9</sup> Muse,  
His Pegasus,<sup>1</sup> nor any thing that's his;  
Thou shalt not bear false witness like "the Blues"<sup>2</sup>—  
(There's one, at least, is very fond of this);  
Thou shalt not write, in short, but what I choose:  
1645 This is true criticism, and you may kiss—  
Exactly as you please, or not,—the rod;  
But if you don't, I'll lay it on, by G—d!<sup>3</sup>

## 207

If any person should presume to assert  
This story is not moral, first, I pray,  
1650 That they will not cry out before they're hurt,  
Then that they'll read it o'er again, and say,  
(But, doubtless, nobody will be so pert)  
That this is not a moral tale, though gay;  
Besides, in Canto Twelfth, I mean to show  
1655 The very place where wicked people go.

\* \* \*

## 213

But now at thirty years my hair is grey—  
(I wonder what it will be like at forty?  
I thought of a peruke<sup>o</sup> the other day—)  
My heart is not much greener; and, in short, I  
1700 Have squander'd my whole summer while 'twas May,  
And feel no more the spirit to retort; I  
Have spent my life, both interest and principal,  
And deem not, what I deem'd, my soul invincible.

## 214

1705 No more—no more—Oh! never more on me  
The freshness of the heart can fall like dew,  
Which out of all the lovely things we see  
Extracts emotions beautiful and new,  
Hived in our bosoms like the bag o' the bee:  
Think'st thou the honey with those objects grew?  
1710 Alas! 'twas not in them, but in thy power  
To double even the sweetness of a flower.

## 215

No more—no more—Oh! never more, my heart,  
Canst thou be my sole world, my universe!  
Once all in all, but now a thing apart,  
1715 Thou canst not be my blessing or my curse:  
The illusion's gone for ever, and thou art  
Insensible, I trust, but none the worse,  
And in thy stead I've got a deal of judgment,  
Though heaven knows how it ever found a  
1720 lodgement.

## 216

My days of love are over; me no more  
The charms of maid, wife, and still less of widow,  
Can make the fool of which they made before,—  
In short, I must not lead the life I did do;  
The credulous hope of mutual minds is o'er,  
1725 The copious use of claret is forbid too,  
So for a good old-gentlemanly vice,  
I think I must take up with avarice.

## 217

Ambition was my idol, which was broken  
Before the shrines of Sorrow, and of Pleasure;

1730 And the two last have left me many a token  
O'er which reflection may be made at leisure:  
Now, like Friar Bacon's brazen head, I've spoken,  
"Time is, Time was, Time's past:"<sup>4</sup>—a chymic  
treasure<sup>5</sup>  
1735 Is glittering youth, which I have spent betimes—  
My heart in passion, and my head on rhymes.

## 218

What is the end of Fame? 'tis but to fill  
A certain portion of uncertain paper:  
Some liken it to climbing up a hill,  
Whose summit, like all hills, is lost in vapour;  
1740 For this men write, speak, preach, and heroes kill,  
And bards burn what they call their "midnight  
taper,"  
To have, when the original is dust,  
A name, a wretched picture, and worse bust.<sup>6</sup>

## 219

1745 What are the hopes of man? Old Egypt's King  
Cheops erected the first pyramid  
And largest, thinking it was just the thing  
To keep his memory whole, and mummy hid;  
But somebody or other rummaging,  
Burglariously broke his coffin's lid:  
1750 Let not a monument give you or me hopes,  
Since not a pinch of dust remains of Cheops.

## 220

But I being fond of true philosophy,  
Say very often to myself, "Alas!  
All things that have been born were born to die,  
1755

And flesh (which Death mows down to hay) is  
grass;<sup>7</sup>  
You've pass'd your youth not so unpleasantly,  
And if you had it o'er again—'twould pass—  
So thank your stars that matters are no worse,  
And read your Bible, sir, and mind your purse."  
1760

## 221

But for the present, gentle reader! and  
Still gentler purchaser! the bard—that's I—  
Must, with permission, shake you by the hand,  
And so your humble servant, and good-b'ye!  
We meet again, if we should understand  
1765 Each other; and if not, I shall not try  
Your patience further than by this short sample—  
'Twere well if others follow'd my example.

## 222

"Go, little book, from this my solitude!  
I cast thee on the waters—go thy ways!  
1770 And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,  
The world will find thee after many days."  
When Southey's read, and Wordsworth understood,  
I can't help putting in my claim to praise—  
1775 The four first rhymes are Southey's every line:<sup>8</sup>  
For God's sake, reader! take them not for mine.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The Juan of legend was a popular subject in English pantomime.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In Homer's *Iliad* the king commanding the Greeks in the siege of Troy. This line is translated from a Latin ode by Horace.[Return to reference 2](#)



- Note 3: Into the middle of things (Latin; Horace's *Art of Poetry* 148).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, the smoothest road for heroic poetry.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Normally "José"; Byron transferred the accent to keep his meter.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Calderón de la Barca and Lope de Vega, the great Spanish dramatists of the early 17th century.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Gregor von Feinagle, a German expert on the art of memory who had lectured in England in 1811.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Athenian. *Attic salt* is a term for the famed wit of the Athenians.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Lady Byron had thought her husband might be insane and sought medical advice on the matter. This and other passages obviously allude to his wife, although Byron insisted that Donna Inez was not intended to be a caricature of Lady Byron. In her determination to preserve her son's innocence, Donna Inez also shares traits with Byron's mother.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Houses and the adjoining lands. "Chancery suit": a case in what was then the highest English court, notorious for its delays.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Includes biology, physiology, and particularly botany, popular in the era in part because study of plants' stamens and pistils offered a form of surreptitious sex education.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In *On the Sublime* 10, the Greek rhetorician Longinus praises a passage of erotic longing from one of Sappho's odes.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Virgil's *Eclogue* 2 begins: "The shepherd, Corydon, burned with love for the handsome Alexis."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), Lucretius argues that the universe can be explained in entirely

materialist terms without reference to any god.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: The Latin satires of Juvenal attacked the corruption of Roman society in the 1st century C.E. and displayed its vices.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Fact! There is, or was, such an edition, with all the obnoxious epigrams of Martial placed by themselves at the end [*Byron's note*]. Martial, another Latin poet, was a contemporary of Juvenal.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A word [to the wise] is sufficient (Latin).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The belt ("zone") of Venus made its wearer sexually irresistible.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The Moorish king of Granada (the last Islamic enclave in Spain) wept when his capital fell and he and his people were forced to emigrate to Africa (1492).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, faithful to her husband.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: It comes to my mind (Italian).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: By way of a fine or legal penalty.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The sorceress in Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581) who seduces Rinaldo into forgetting his vows as a crusader.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: A member of a legendary family of Roman kings noted for tyranny and cruelty; perhaps a reference specifically to Lucius Tarquinius, the villain of Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In *Metamorphoses* 7 Ovid tells the story of Medea's mad infatuation for Jason.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, postobit bonds (*post obitum*, "after death" [Latin]): loans to an heir that fall due after the death of the person whose estate he or she is to inherit. Byron's meaning is probably that only theology purports to tell us what rewards are due in heaven.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Byron's friend the poet Thomas Moore, who in 1800 had translated the *Odes* of the ancient Greek Anacreon and whose popular Orientalist poem *Lalla Rookh* (1817) had portrayed the

“heathenish heaven” of Islam as populated by “houris,” beautiful maidens who in the afterlife will give heroes their reward.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Secretly aware (of her feelings).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Titan Prometheus incurred the wrath of Zeus by stealing fire from heaven for humans.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, with horns that, growing on the forehead, were the traditional emblem of the cuckolded husband.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Morning reception.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A tapestry hanging on a wall.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Perhaps a chamber pot.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Servants, so named for the followers Achilles led to the Trojan War.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The *fidus Achates* (“faithful Achates”) of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, whose loyalty to Aeneas has become proverbial.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Job’s wife advised her afflicted husband to “curse God, and die.” He replied, “Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh” (Job 2:9–10).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The complete form of the modern word *posse* (*posse comitatus* means literally “power of the county” [Latin], that is, the body of citizens summoned by a sheriff to preserve order in the county).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Clarence, brother of Edward IV and of the future Richard III, was executed for treason, reputedly by being drowned in a cask (“butt”) of malmsey, a sweet and aromatic wine.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A formidable opponent.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In Genesis 39:7ff. the chaste Joseph flees from the advances of Potiphar’s wife, leaving “his garment in her hand.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Judgment against the plaintiff for failure to establish his case.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: William B. Gurney (1777–1855), official shorthand writer for the houses of Parliament and a famous court reporter.[Return](#)

[to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: The Germanic tribes that overran Spain and other parts of southern Europe in the 5th through 8th centuries, notorious for rape and violence.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Of a compass.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The candle (to melt wax to seal the letter).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: She follows you everywhere (French). Byron himself owned a seal inscribed with this motto, as well as a cornelian gemstone, given him by John Edleston, the boy with whom he had a romantic friendship while at Cambridge. Byron's 1807 poem "The Cornelian" memorializes this relationship.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Go with me (Latin, literal trans.); handbook. Byron is deriding the neoclassical view that Aristotle's *Poetics* proposes "rules" for writing epic and tragedy.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The assemblage of supernatural personages and incidents introduced into a literary work.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The usual plays on the Juan legend ended with Juan in hell; an early 20th-century version is George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: This is one of many passages, in prose and verse, in which Byron vigorously defends Dryden and Pope against his Romantic contemporaries.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: George Crabbe, whom Byron admired, was the author of *The Village* and other realistic poems of rural life.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Fountain on Mount Helicon whose waters supposedly gave inspiration. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Thomas Campbell, Samuel Rogers, and Thomas Moore were lesser poets of the Romantic period; the last two were close friends of Byron and members of London's liberal Whig circles.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The wealthy William Sotheby, minor poet and translator, is satirized, as Botherby, in Byron's *Beppo*.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: The winged horse symbolizing poetic inspiration. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, Bluestockings, a contemporary term for female intellectuals, among whom Byron numbered his wife (line 1644).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Byron's parody of the Ten Commandments seemed blasphemous to some commentators. In 1817 the radical publisher William Hone was put on trial for the ostensible blasphemy of a political satire that had used the form of the Anglican Church's creed and catechism.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Spoken by a bronze bust in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594). This comedy was based on legends about the magical power of Roger Bacon, the 13th-century Franciscan monk who was said to have built with diabolical assistance a brazen head capable of speech.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: "Chymic": alchemic. That is, the "treasure" is counterfeit gold.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Byron was unhappy with the portrait bust of him recently made by the Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: An echo of Isaiah 40:6 and 1 Peter 1:24: "All flesh is grass."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The lines are part of the last stanza of Southey's "Epilogue to the Lay of the Laureate."[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *nobleman*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cotton*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lawsuit*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *without a will*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *family line*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *belief*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *moment*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *rank*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wig*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***From Canto II***

\* \* \*

### **[THE SHIPWRECK]**

#### **11**

Juan embark'd—the ship got under way,  
The wind was fair, the water passing rough:  
A devil of a sea rolls in that bay,  
As I, who've cross'd it oft, know well enough;  
85 And, standing upon deck, the dashing spray  
Flies in one's face, and makes it weather-tough:  
And there he stood to take, and take again,  
His first—perhaps his last—farewell of Spain.

#### **12**

I can't but say it is an awkward sight  
90 To see one's native land receding through  
The growing waters; it unmans one quite,  
Especially when life is rather new:  
I recollect Great Britain's coast looks white,  
But almost every other country's blue,  
95 When gazing on them, mystified by distance,  
We enter on our nautical existence.

\* \* \*

#### **17**

And Juan wept, and much he sigh'd and thought,

130 While his salt tears dropp'd into the salt sea,  
"Sweets to the sweet" (I like so much to quote;  
You must excuse this extract, 'tis where she,  
The Queen of Denmark, for Ophelia brought  
Flowers to the grave);<sup>1</sup> and, sobbing often, he  
135 Reflected on his present situation,  
And seriously resolved on reformation.

## 18

"Farewell, my Spain! a long farewell!" he cried,  
"Perhaps I may revisit thee no more,  
But die, as many an exiled heart hath died,  
Of its own thirst to see again thy shore:  
140 Farewell, where Guadalquivir's waters glide!  
Farewell, my mother! and, since all is o'er,  
Farewell, too, dearest Julia!—(Here he drew  
Her letter out again, and read it through.)

## 19

145 "And, oh! if e'er I should forget, I swear—  
But that's impossible, and cannot be—  
Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,  
Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,  
Than I resign thine image, oh, my fair!  
Or think of any thing excepting thee;  
150 A mind diseased no remedy can physic  
(Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew sea-sick).

## 20

"Sooner shall heaven kiss earth (here he fell sicker),  
Oh, Julia! what is every other woe?  
(For God's sake let me have a glass of liquor,  
155 Pedro, Battista, help me down below.)



160 Julia, my love! (you rascal, Pedro, quicker)—  
Oh, Julia! (this curst vessel pitches so)—  
Beloved Julia, hear me still beseeching!"  
(Here he grew inarticulate with retching)

## 21

165 He felt that chilling heaviness of heart,  
Or rather stomach, which, alas! attends,  
Beyond the best apothecary's art,  
The loss of love, the treachery of friends,  
Or death of those we dote on, when a part  
Of us dies with them as each fond hope ends:  
No doubt he would have been much more pathetic,  
But the sea acted as a strong emetic.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

## 52

410 Then rose from sea to sky the wild farewell—  
Then shriek'd the timid, and stood still the brave,  
—  
Then some leap'd overboard with dreadful yell,  
As eager to anticipate their grave;  
And the sea yawn'd around her like a hell,  
And down she suck'd with her the whirling wave,  
Like one who grapples with his enemy,  
415 And strives to strangle him before he die.

## 53

And first one universal shriek there rush'd,  
Louder than the loud ocean, like a crash  
Of echoing thunder; and then all was hush'd,  
Save the wild wind and the remorseless dash

420 Of billows; but at intervals there gush'd,  
Accompanied with a convulsive splash,  
A solitary shriek, the bubbling cry  
Of some strong swimmer in his agony.

\* \* \*

## 56

Juan got into the long-boat, and there  
Contrived to help Pedrillo<sup>3</sup> to a place;  
It seem'd as if they had exchanged their care,  
For Juan wore the magisterial face  
Which courage gives, while poor Pedrillo's pair  
445 Of eyes were crying for their owner's case:  
Battista, though (a name call'd shortly Tita)  
Was lost by getting at some aqua-vita.<sup>o</sup>

## 57

Pedro, his valet, too, he tried to save,  
But the same cause, conducive to his loss,  
450 Left him so drunk, he jump'd into the wave  
As o'er the cutter's edge he tried to cross,  
And so he found a wine-and-watery grave;  
They could not rescue him although so close,  
Because the sea ran higher every minute,  
455 And for the boat—the crew kept crowding in it.

\* \* \*

## 66

'Tis thus with people in an open boat,  
They live upon the love of life, and bear  
More than can be believed, or even thought,

And stand like rocks the tempest's wear and tear;  
And hardship still has been the sailor's lot,  
525 Since Noah's ark went cruising here and there;  
She had a curious crew as well as cargo,  
Like the first old Greek privateer, the Argo.<sup>4</sup>

## 67

But man is a carnivorous production,  
And must have meals, at least one meal a day;  
530 He cannot live, like woodcocks, upon suction,<sup>5</sup>  
But, like the shark and tiger, must have prey;  
Although his anatomical construction  
Bears vegetables, in a grumbling way,  
535 Your labouring people think beyond all question,  
Beef, veal, and mutton, better for digestion.

## 68

And thus it was with this our hapless crew,  
For on the third day there came on a calm,  
And though at first their strength it might renew,  
And lying on their weariness like balm,  
540 Lull'd them like turtles sleeping on the blue  
Of ocean, when they woke they felt a qualm,  
And fell all ravenously on their provision,  
Instead of hoarding it with due precision.

\* \* \*

## 72

The seventh day,<sup>6</sup> and no wind—the burning sun  
Blister'd and scorch'd, and, stagnant on the sea,  
570 They lay like carcasses; and hope was none,  
Save in the breeze that came not; savagely

They glared upon each other—all was done,  
Water, and wine, and food,—and you might see  
The longings of the cannibal arise  
575 (Although they spoke not) in their wolfish eyes.

### 73

At length one whisper'd his companion, who  
Whisper'd another, and thus it went round,  
And then into a hoarser murmur grew,  
An ominous, and wild, and desperate sound;  
580 And when his comrade's thought each sufferer knew,  
'Twas but his own, suppress'd till now, he found:  
And out they spoke of lots for flesh and blood,  
And who should die to be his fellow's food.

### 74

But ere they came to this, they that day shared  
585 Some leathern caps, and what remain'd of shoes;  
And then they look'd around them, and despair'd,  
And none to be the sacrifice would choose;  
At length the lots were torn up, and prepared,  
But of materials that much shock the Muse—  
590 Having no paper, for the want of better,  
They took by force from Juan Julia's letter.

### 75

The lots were made, and mark'd, and mix'd, and  
handed,  
In silent horror, and their distribution  
Lull'd even the savage hunger which demanded,  
595 Like the Promethean vulture,<sup>7</sup> this pollution;  
None in particular had sought or plann'd it,  
'Twas nature gnaw'd them to this resolution,

By which none were permitted to be neuter—  
And the lot fell on Juan's luckless tutor.

600

## 76

He but requested to be bled to death:  
The surgeon had his instruments, and bled  
Pedrillo, and so gently ebb'd his breath,  
You hardly could perceive when he was dead.  
He died as born, a Catholic in faith,  
605 Like most in the belief in which they're bred,  
And first a little crucifix he kiss'd,  
And then held out his jugular and wrist.

## 77

The surgeon, as there was no other fee,  
Had his first choice of morsels for his pains;  
610 But being thirstiest at the moment, he  
Preferr'd a draught from the fast-flowing veins:  
Part was divided, part thrown in the sea,  
And such things as the entrails and the brains  
Regaled two sharks, who follow'd o'er the billow—  
615 The sailors ate the rest of poor Pedrillo.

## 78

The sailors ate him, all save three or four,  
Who were not quite so fond of animal food;  
To these was added Juan, who, before  
Refusing his own spaniel, hardly could  
620 Feel now his appetite increased much more;  
'Twas not to be expected that he should,  
Even in extremity of their disaster,  
Dine with them on his pastor and his master.

## 79

625 'Twas better that he did not; for, in fact,  
The consequence was awful in the extreme;  
For they, who were most ravenous in the act,  
Went raging mad—Lord! how they did blaspheme!  
And foam and roll, with strange convulsions rack'd,  
Drinking salt-water like a mountain-stream,  
630 Tearing, and grinning, howling, screeching,  
swearing,  
And, with hyaena-laughter, died despairing.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

1818–19

1819

## Endnotes

- Note 1: *Hamlet* 5.1.227.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In stanzas 22–51 (here omitted) the ship, bound for Leghorn in Italy, runs into a storm and is battered into a helpless, sinking wreck.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Juan's tutor.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the Greek myth the *Argo* is the ship on which Jason set out in quest of the Golden Fleece. Byron ironically calls it a "privateer" (a private ship licensed by a government in wartime to attack and pillage enemy vessels).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Woodcocks probe the turf with their long flexible bills, seeming to suck air as they feed.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: On the fourth day the crew had killed and eaten Juan's pet spaniel. Byron based the episode of cannibalism that follows on various historical accounts of disasters at sea, including his grandfather Admiral Byron's 1768 narrative of his misadventure off the coast of Patagonia.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Because Prometheus had stolen fire from heaven to give to humans, Zeus punished him by chaining him to a

mountain peak, where an eagle fed on his ever-renewing liver.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8:

After the long-boat in which he and his shipmates took refuge breaks up in another storm, Juan is washed ashore, the sole survivor. There, on the beach of a Greek island, he is discovered by a young woman, Haidee, daughter of a pirate and the "greatest heiress of the Eastern Isles" thanks to her father's ill-gotten gains. Juan's love affair with Haidee, chronicled in the remainder of canto II, is interrupted in canto III when her pirate father returns from his latest voyage and erupts in rage on finding them together. Haidee dies, broken-hearted, but Juan's adventures continue when her father ships him off as a slave. Newly arrived in the slave market of

[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *brandy*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***From Canto XI***<sup>[1](#)</sup>

\* \* \*

### **Endnotes**

- Note 1: Canto XI opens with Don Juan's arrival in England. Empress Catherine has sent him there on a diplomatic mission and in the hope that travel will restore her overtaxed lover's declining health.[Return to reference 1](#)



[DON JUAN'S JOURNEY TO LONDON]

8

Don Juan had got out on Shooter's Hill;<sup>2</sup>  
Sunset the time, the place the same declivity  
Which looks along that vale of good and ill  
Where London streets ferment in full activity;  
60 While every thing around was calm and still,  
Except the creak of wheels, which on their pivot  
he  
Heard,—and that bee-like, bubbling, busy hum  
Of cities, that boil over with their scum:—

9

I say, Don Juan, wrapt in contemplation,  
65 Walk'd on behind his carriage, o'er the summit,  
And lost in wonder of so great a nation,  
Gave way to't, since he could not overcome it.  
"And here," he cried, "is Freedom's chosen station:  
Here peals the people's voice, nor can entomb it  
70 Racks, prisons, inquisitions; resurrection  
Awaits it, each new meeting or election.

10

"Here are chaste wives, pure lives; here people pay  
But what they please; and if that things be dear,  
Tis only that they love to throw away  
75 Their cash, to show how much they have a-year.  
Here laws are all inviolate; none lay  
Traps for the traveller; every highway's clear:  
Here—" he was interrupted by a knife,  
With,—"Damn your eyes! your money or your life!"—

These freeborn sounds proceeded from four pads<sup>o</sup>  
 In ambush laid, who had perceived him loiter  
 Behind his carriage; and, like handy lads,  
 Had seized the lucky hour to reconnoitre,<sup>3</sup>  
 In which the heedless gentleman who gads  
 85 Upon the road, unless he prove a fighter,  
 May find himself within that isle of riches  
 Exposed to lose his life as well as breeches.

## 12

Juan, who did not understand a word  
 Of English, save their shibboleth,<sup>4</sup> "God damn!"  
 90 And even that he had so rarely heard,  
 He sometimes thought 'twas only their "Salim,"<sup>5</sup>  
 Or "God be with you!"—and 'tis not absurd  
 To think so; for half English as I am<sup>6</sup>  
 (To my misfortune) never can I say  
 95 I heard them wish "God with you," save that way;—

## 13

Juan yet quickly understood their gesture,  
 And being somewhat choleric<sup>o</sup> and sudden,  
 Drew forth a pocket pistol from his vesture,<sup>o</sup>  
 And fired it into one assailant's pudding<sup>o</sup>—  
 100 Who fell, as rolls an ox o'er in his pasture,  
 And roar'd out, as he writhed his native mud in,  
 Unto his nearest follower or henchman.  
 "Oh Jack! I'm floor'd by that 'ere bloody Frenchman!"

## 14

105 On which Jack and his train set off at speed.  
And Juan's suite, late scatter'd at a distance,  
Came up, all marvelling at such a deed,  
And offering, as usual, late assistance.  
Juan, who saw the moon's late minion<sup>7</sup> bleed  
110 As if his veins would pour out his existence,  
Stood calling out for bandages and lint,  
And wish'd he had been less hasty with his flint.<sub>o</sub>

## 15

"Perhaps." thought he, "it is the country's wont<sub>o</sub>  
To welcome foreigners in this way: now  
I recollect some innkeepers who don't  
115 Differ, except in robbing with a bow,  
In lieu of a bare blade and brazen front.  
But what is to be done? I can't allow  
The fellow to lie groaning on the road:  
So take him up; I'll help you with the load."  
120

## 16<sup>8</sup>

But ere they could perform this pious duty,  
The dying man cried, "Hold! I've got my gruel!  
Oh! for a glass of *max*! We've miss'd our booty;  
Let me die where I am!" And as the fuel  
125 Of life shrunk in his heart, and thick and sooty  
The drops fell from his death-wound, and he drew  
ill  
His breath,—he from his swelling throat untied  
A kerchief, crying, "Give Sal that!"—and died.

## 17

The cravat stain'd with bloody drops fell down  
Before Don Juan's feet: he could not tell

130 Exactly why it was before him thrown,  
Nor what the meaning of the man's farewell.  
Poor Tom was once a kiddy upon town,  
A thorough varmint, and a *real* swell,<sup>9</sup>  
Full flash, all fancy, until fairly diddled,<sup>o</sup>  
135 His pockets first and then his body riddled.

## 18

Don Juan, having done the best he could  
In all the circumstances of the case,  
As soon as "Crowner's quest"<sup>1</sup> allow'd, pursued  
His travels to the capital apace;—  
140 Esteeming it a little hard he should  
In twelve hours' time, and very little space,  
Have been obliged to slay a freeborn native  
In self-defence: this made him meditative.

## 19

145 He from the world had cut off a great man,  
Who in his time had made heroic bustle.  
Who in a row like Tom could lead the van,  
Booze in the ken, or at the spellken hustle?<sup>2</sup>  
Who queer a flat? Who (spite of Bow-street's ban)<sup>3</sup>  
On the high toby-spice so flash the muzzle?<sup>4</sup>  
150 Who on a lark, with black-eyed Sal (his blowing),<sup>o</sup>  
So prime, so swell, so nutty,<sup>o</sup> and so knowing?<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Eight miles southeast of London and affording a panoramic view of the city, Shooter's Hill was favored by

thieves, who could conceal themselves in the nearby woods.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Scout out the situation.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A word that can be used as a test that will betray the outsider who has infiltrated a group. In the Old Testament Book of Judges (12:6), men's inability to pronounce the word *Shibboleth*—Hebrew for ear of grain—reveals them to be Ephraimites and gets them killed by the Gileadites.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Islamic greeting: "Peace be with you."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Byron was Scottish on his mother's side.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Alluding to Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Part 1 (1.3.23), where Falstaff describes his fellow thieves as the "minions" (favorites) "of the moon."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Byron peppers stanzas 16 through 19 with specimens of "flash" language—slang favored by England's criminal subculture. A glossary from 1823 explains that "flash" is "the language of persons whose transactions demand concealment, yet require that they should mix with those from whom it should be concealed." This language, first uttered by the highwayman and then adopted by the narrator, is meant to be as baffling for much of Byron's audience as it is for Spanish-speaking Juan. Byron could, however, assume knowingness on the part of some readers: for a certain set of elite men about town, flash was fashionable. "I've got my gruel" is slang for "I've been killed"; "max" is gin.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Lines 133–34, more slang: "kiddy," a thief who shows off his success with expensive clothing; "varmint," someone natty or dashing; "swell," someone elegantly dressed.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Coroner's inquest.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: More slang: "ken," house where thieves congregate; "spellken," theater.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: To “queer a flat” is to con a credulous person. “Bow-street’s”: London street where the police had their headquarters.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: More slang: “high toby-spice,” robbery on horseback; “flash the muzzle,” swagger openly.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: “The advance of Science and of Language has rendered it unnecessary to translate the above good and true English, spoken in its original purity by the select Mobility and their Patrons”: *Byron’s own note*, which continues by quoting a song, popular in his youth, that uses many of the flash terms he has included in his text. “Mobility” is slang for the “mob,” the opposite of “nobility.” Byron concludes the note by advising gentlemen readers who need a translation to consult “John Jackson, Esq[uire], Professor of Pugilism,” the prize-fighter who founded the boxing academy Byron had attended in London.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *foot pads, muggers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *irritable*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *clothes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stomach*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pistol*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *custom*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cheated*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mistress*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lusty*[Return to reference °](#)

[ARRIVAL IN LONDON]<sup>6</sup>

32

Juan, whose was a delicate commission,  
Private, though publicly important, bore  
250 No title to point out with due precision  
The exact affair on which he was sent o'er.  
Twas merely known, that on a secret mission  
A foreigner of rank had graced our shore,  
255 Young, handsome, and accomplish'd, who was said  
(In whispers) to have turn'd his sovereign's head.

33

Some rumour also of some strange adventures  
Had gone before him, and his wars and loves:  
And as romantic heads are pretty painters,  
And, above all, an Englishwoman's roves  
260 Into the excursive, breaking the indentures<sup>o</sup>  
Of sober reason, wheresoe'er it moves.  
He found himself extremely in the fashion.  
Which serves our thinking people for a passion.

34

I don't mean that they are passionless, but quite  
265 The contrary; but then 'tis in the head;  
Yet as the consequences are as bright  
As if they acted with the heart instead,  
What after all can signify the site  
Of ladies' lucubrations?<sup>o</sup> So they lead  
270 In safety to the place for which you start,  
What matters if the road be head or heart?

### 35

Juan presented in the proper place,  
To proper placemen,<sup>o</sup> every Russ credential;  
And was received with all the due grimace,  
275 By those who govern in the mood potential,<sup>z</sup>  
Who, seeing a handsome stripling<sup>o</sup> with smooth  
face.  
Thought (what in state affairs is most essential)  
That they as easily might *do* the youngster,  
280 As hawks may pounce upon a woodland songster.

### 36

They err'd, as aged men will do; but by  
And by we'll talk of that; and if we don't,  
'Twill be because our notion is not high  
Of politicians and their double front,  
Who live by lies, yet dare not boldly lie—  
285 Now what I love in women is, they won't  
Or can't do otherwise than lie, but do it  
So well, the very truth seems falsehood to it.

### 37

And, after all what is a lie? 'Tis but  
The truth in masquerade; and I defy  
290 Historians, heroes, lawyers, priests, to put  
A fact without some leaven of a lie.  
The very shadow of true Truth would shut  
Up annals, revelations, poesy,  
And prophecy—except it should be dated  
300 Some years before the incidents related.

\* \* \*



## Endnotes

- Note 6: Don Juan's arrival in London's fashionable West End gives Byron the chance to revisit in imagination the city he had left behind forever in 1816.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In grammar the mood potential, also known as the subjunctive, is used to express possibility. Byron's punning point is that these placemen are not the actual governors but, exerting influence, might as well be.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *bonds*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *studies*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *public officials*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *youth*[Return to reference °](#)

[SOCIAL SUCCESS]

45

In the great world,—which, being interpreted,  
Meaneth the west or worst end of a city,  
And about twice two thousand people bred  
355 By no means to be very wise or witty,  
But to sit up while others lie in bed,  
And look down on the universe with pity,—  
Juan, as an inveterate patrician,  
Was well received by persons of condition.

360

46

He was a bachelor, which is a matter  
Of import both to virgin and to bride,  
The former's hymeneal<sup>o</sup> hopes to flatter;  
And (should she not hold fast by love or pride)  
Tis also of some moment to the latter;  
365 A rib's a thorn in a wed gallant's side,  
Requires decorum, and is apt to double  
The horrid sin—and what's still worse, the trouble.

365

47

But Juan was a bachelor—of arts,  
And parts, and hearts; he danced and sung, and  
370 had  
An air as sentimental as Mozart's  
Softest of melodies; and could be sad  
Or cheerful, without any "flaws or starts,"<sup>8</sup>  
Just at the proper time; and though a lad,  
Had seen the world—which is a curious sight,  
375 And very much unlike what people write.

370

375

## 48

Fair virgins blush'd upon him; wedded dames  
Bloom'd also in less transitory hues;  
For both commodities dwell by the Thames,  
380 The painting and the painted; youth, ceruse,<sup>9</sup>  
Against his heart preferr'd their usual claims,  
Such as no gentleman can quite refuse:  
Daughters admired his dress, and pious mothers  
Enquired his income, and if he had brothers.

## 49

385 The milliners<sup>o</sup> who furnish "drapery Misses"<sup>1</sup>  
Throughout the season, upon speculation  
Of payment ere the honey-moon's last kisses  
Have waned into a crescent's coruscation,<sup>o</sup>  
Thought such an opportunity as this is,  
390 Of a rich foreigner's initiation,  
Not to be overlook'd—and gave such credit,  
That future bridegrooms swore, and sigh'd, and paid  
it.

## 50

The Blues,<sup>2</sup> that tender tribe, who sigh o'er sonnets,  
And with the pages of the last Review  
395 Line the interior of their beads or bonnets,  
Advanced in all their azure's highest hue:  
They talk'd bad French or Spanish, and upon its  
Late authors ask'd him for a hint or two;  
And which was softest, Russian or Castilian?  
400 And whether in his travels he saw Ilion?<sup>3</sup>

## 51

Juan, who was a little superficial,  
And not in literature a great Drawcansir,<sup>4</sup>  
Examined by this learned and especial  
Jury of matrons, scarce knew what to answer:  
His duties warlike, loving or official,  
405 His steady application as a dancer,  
Had kept him from the brink of Hippocrene,<sup>5</sup>  
Which now he found was blue instead of green.

## 52

However, he replied at hazard, with  
A modest confidence and calm assurance,  
410 Which lent his learned lucubrations pith,  
And pass'd for arguments of good endurance.  
That prodigy, Miss Araminta Smith  
(Who at sixteen translated "Hercules Furens"<sup>6</sup>  
Into as furious English), with her best look,  
415 Set down his sayings in her common-place book.<sup>7</sup>

## 53

Juan knew several languages—as well  
He might—and brought them up with skill, in time  
To save his fame with each accomplish'd belle,  
Who still regretted that he did not rhyme.  
420 There wanted but this requisite to swell  
His qualities (with them) into sublime:  
Lady Fitz-Frisky, and Miss Maevia Mannish,  
Each long'd extremely to be sung in Spanish.

## 54

However, he did pretty well, and was  
425 Admitted as an aspirant to all  
The coteries, and, as in Banquo's glass,<sup>8</sup>

At great assemblies or in parties small,  
He saw ten thousand living authors pass,  
That being about their average numeral;  
430 Also the eighty "greatest living poets,"  
As every paltry magazine can show *its*.

## 55

In twice five years the "greatest living poet,"  
Like to the champion in the fisty ring,<sup>o</sup>  
Is call'd on to support his claim, or show it,  
435 Although 'tis an imaginary thing.  
Even I—albeit I'm sure I did not know it,  
Nor sought of foolscap<sup>9</sup> subjects to be king,—  
Was reckon'd a considerable time,  
440 The grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

## Endnotes

- Note 8: Quoting Lady Macbeth, who, aiming to get her husband to pull himself together after the murder of the king, shames him for his "flaws and starts" (*Macbeth* 3.4.63). [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Ceruse is an ingredient in both paint and cosmetics. Both youthful women who blush naturally and matrons who use cosmetics to appear as young women are laying claim to Juan's heart. [Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: 'Drapery Misses'—This term is probably anything now but a *mystery*; it was, however, almost so to me when I first returned from the East in 1811–1812.—It means a pretty, a high-born, a fashionable young female, well-instructed by her friends, and furnished by her Milliner with a wardrobe upon credit, to be repaid, when *married*, by the *husband* [*Byron's*

*note*, which continues with a reminiscence about the pretty young heiress who first explained to him this feature of the marriage market].[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Bluestockings, female intellectuals.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Troy, setting for Homer's epic the *Iliad*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A blustering, tyrannical character in George Villiers's comedy *The Rehearsal* (1671).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Spring on Mount Helicon, sacred to the muses.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: *Hercules Insane*, tragedy by the Latin poet Seneca the Younger (ca. 4 B.C.E.–65 C.E.).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Notebook she has filled up with transcriptions of choice excerpts from her reading.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In *Macbeth* 4.1, the witches conjure up the apparitions of eight kings, each resembling the murdered Banquo. The last in the sequence holds out a glass (mirror) in which, to his horror, Macbeth beholds the images of even more of Banquo's regal descendants. The numerosness of the aspirants to literary fame whom Juan encounters in London is horrifying too, Byron suggests.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Large sheets of paper.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In the succeeding lines, Byron extends this comparison with Napoleon by likening his less successful publications to Napoleon's military setbacks. "Juan" was his Moscow, Byron states (line 441), alluding to the defeat that in 1812 was a turning point in Napoleon's fortunes.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *marital*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *seamstresses*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gleam of light*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *boxing ring*[Return to reference °](#)

[“CHANGE GROWS TOO CHANGEABLE”]

74

585 Our hero, as a hero, young and handsome,  
Noble, rich, celebrated, and a stranger,  
Like other slaves of course must pay his ransom  
Before he can escape from so much danger  
As will environ a conspicuous man. Some  
590 Talk about poetry, and “rack and manger,”<sup>2</sup>  
And ugliness, disease, as toil and trouble;—  
I wish they knew the life of a young noble.

75

They are young, but know not youth—it is  
anticipated;  
Handsome but wasted, rich without a sou;<sup>3</sup>  
Their vigour in a thousand arms is dissipated;  
595 Their cash comes *from*, their wealth goes *to* a  
Jew;  
Both senates see their nightly votes participated  
Between the tyrant’s and the tribunes’ crew;  
And having voted, dined, drank, gamed, and  
whored,  
600 The family vault receives another lord.

76

“Where is the world?” cries Young,<sup>4</sup> at *eighty*  
—“Where  
The world in which a man was born?” Alas!  
Where is the world of *eight* years past? *Twas there*—  
I look for it—’tis gone, a Globe of Glass!  
Crack’d, shiver’d, vanish’d, scarcely gazed on, ere

605       A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.  
Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings,  
And dandies all are gone on the wind's wings.

## 77<sup>5</sup>

Where is Napoleon the Grand? God knows:  
Where little Castlereagh? The devil can tell:  
610       Where Grattan, Curran, Sheridan, all those  
Who bound the bar or senate in their spell?  
Where is the unhappy Queen, with all her woes?  
And where the Daughter, whom the Isles loved  
well?  
615       Where are those martyr'd saints the Five per cents?<sup>o</sup>  
And where—oh, where the devil are the rents?

## 78

Where's Brummel? Dish'd. Where's Long Pole  
Wellesley? Diddled.<sup>6</sup>  
Where's Whitbread? Romilly? Where's George the  
Third?<sup>7</sup>  
Where is his will? (That's not so soon unriddled.)<sup>8</sup>  
And where is "Fum" the Fourth, our "royal bird?"  
620       Gone down, it seems, to Scotland to be fiddled  
Unto by Sawney's violin, we have heard:<sup>9</sup>  
"Caw me, caw thee"—for six months hath been  
hatching,  
This scene of royal itch and loyal scratching.

## 79

625       Where is Lord This? And where my Lady That?  
The Honourable Mistresses and Misses?  
Some laid aside like an old opera hat,  
Married, unmarried, and remarried: (this is



An evolution oft performed of late.)

630     Where are the Dublin shouts—and London hisses?  
Where are the Grenvilles? Turn'd as usual.<sup>1</sup> Where  
My friends the Whigs? Exactly where they were.<sup>2</sup>

## 80

Where are the Lady Carolines and Franceses?<sup>3</sup>

635     Divorced or doing thereanent.<sup>4</sup> Ye annals  
So brilliant, where the list of routs and dances is,—  
Thou Morning Post,<sup>5</sup> sole record of the panels  
Broken in carriages, and all the phantasies  
Of fashion,—say what streams now fill those  
channels?  
Some die, some fly, some languish on the Continent,  
640     Because the times have hardly left them one tenant.

## 81

Some who once set their caps at cautious dukes,

Have taken up at length with younger brothers:

Some heiresses have bit at sharpers' <sup>o</sup> hooks:

Some maids have been made wives, some merely  
mothers;

645     Others have lost their fresh and fairy looks:

In short, the list of alterations bothers.

There's little strange in this, but something strange is  
The unusual quickness of these common changes.

## 82

Talk not of seventy years as age!<sup>6</sup> in seven

650     I have seen more changes, down from monarchs  
to

The humblest individual under heaven,

Than might suffice a moderate century through.

I knew that nought was lasting, but now even  
Change grows too changeable, without being new:  
Nought's permanent among the human race,  
655 Except the Whigs *not* getting into place.

### 83

I have seen Napoleon, who seem'd quite a Jupiter,  
Shrink to a Saturn. I have seen a Duke<sup>7</sup>  
(No matter which) turn politician stupider,  
If that can well be, than his wooden look.  
660 But it is time that I should hoist my "blue Peter,"<sup>8</sup>  
And sail for a new theme;—I have seen—and  
shook  
To see it—the king hiss'd, and then carest;<sup>9</sup>  
But don't pretend to settle which was best.

### 84

I have seen the Landholders without a rap<sup>9</sup>—  
665 I have seen Joanna Southcote<sup>1</sup>—I have seen  
The House of Commons turn'd to a tax-trap—  
I have seen that sad affair of the late Queen—  
I have seen crowns worn instead of a fool's cap—  
I have seen a Congress doing all that's mean<sup>2</sup>—  
670 I have seen some nations like o'erloaded asses  
Kick off their burthens—meaning the high classes.

### 85

I have seen small poets, and great prozers, and  
Interminable—*not eternal*—speakers—  
I have seen the funds at war with house and land—  
675 I have seen the country gentlemen turn squeakers  
—  
I have seen the people ridden o'er like sand

By slaves on horseback<sup>3</sup>—I have seen malt liquors  
Exchanged for “thin potations” by John Bull<sup>4</sup>—  
I have seen John half detect himself a fool.—  
680

## 86

But “carpe diem,”<sup>5</sup> Juan, “carpe, carpe!”  
To-morrow sees another race as gay  
And transient, and devour’d by the same harpy.<sup>6</sup>  
“Life’s a poor player,”—then “play out the play,<sup>7</sup>  
Ye villains!” and above all keep a sharp eye  
685 Much less on what you do than what you say:  
Be hypocritical, be cautious, be  
Not what you *seem*, but always what you *see*.

## 87

But how shall I relate in other cantos  
Of what befell our hero in the land,  
690 Which ’tis the common cry and lie to vaunt as  
A moral country? But I hold my hand—  
For I disdain to write an Atalantis;<sup>8</sup>  
But ’tis as well at once to understand  
You are *not* a moral people, and you know it  
695 Without the aid of too sincere a poet.

## 88

What Juan saw and underwent shall be  
My topic, with of course the due restriction  
Which is required by proper courtesy;  
And recollect the work is only fiction,  
700 And that I sing of neither mine nor me,  
Though every scribe, in some slight turn of diction,  
Will hint allusions never *meant*. Ne’er doubt  
*This*—when I speak, I *don’t hint*, but *speak out*.

## 89

705 Whether he married with the third or fourth  
Offspring of some sage husband-hunting countess,  
Or whether with some virgin of more worth  
(I mean in Fortune's matrimonial bounties)  
He took to regularly peopling Earth,  
710 Of which your lawful awful wedlock fount is,—  
Or whether he was taken in for damages,  
For being too excursive<sup>o</sup> in his homages,—

## 90

Is yet within the unread events of time.  
Thus far, go forth, thou Lay!<sup>o</sup> which I will back  
715 Against the same given quantity of rhyme,  
For being as much the subject of attack  
As ever yet was any work sublime,  
By those who love to say that white is black.  
So much the better!—I may stand alone,  
720 But would not change my free thoughts for a throne.

October 1822

1823

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Rack and ruin—that is, waste and destruction.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, without a cent.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The poet Edward Young published his final work, *Resignation* (1762), at age eighty.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: As follow-up to another mention of Napoleon, Byron turns to naming the famous people who have died since he left England: in this stanza, Viscount Castlereagh (1769–1822), the British politician who helped engineer the restoration of the post-Napoleonic political order after the Battle of Waterloo, and

who committed suicide in 1822; Henry Grattan (1746–1820), Anglo-Irish politician and patriot; John Philpott Curran (1750–1817), another Anglo-Irish politician; Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), playwright, owner of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in London, and parliamentarian; Queen Caroline, estranged wife of King George IV (1768–1821), tried for adultery at her husband's instigation in 1820; her daughter and sometime heir to the throne, Princess Charlotte, who died in childbirth in 1817, aged twenty-one.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: Two men who were ruined financially ("dished" and "diddled"): William Pole Tylney Long Wellesley (1788–1857), dandy who lost his fortune; Beau Brummel (1778–1840), another dandy and sometime leader of English high society who in 1816 was forced by his debts to flee to France.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Sir Samuel Romilly (1752–1818) and Samuel Whitbread (1758–1815), legal reformer and Whig politician respectively, both dead by suicide.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: George III died in 1820, having left the second of the wills he prepared unsigned and therefore without authority.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Byron refers to George IV by the unflattering names the Anglo-Irish poet Thomas Moore had bestowed on him in an 1818 satire *Fum and Hum, The Two Birds of Royalty*. In 1822, George IV made a royal tour to Scotland, where he was fêted—in a servile manner, Byron thought—by Walter Scott, among others. "Sawney" is a derogatory term for a Scotsman.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: George Grenville (1712–1770) had changed parties in the 18th century; his son William (1759–1834) did the same in the 19th.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Whigs, the party of reform, were out of power in 1815 and remained so in 1822.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Referencing two women who became scandalous because of either an affair or a supposed affair with Byron: Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster (1793–1837) and Lady Caroline

Lamb (1785–1828), who made Byron the center of her kiss-and-tell Gothic novel *Glenarvon*, published in 1816 just before his departure from England.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Scots dialect for “something like it.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A Whig newspaper: both Mary Robinson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote for it earlier in the Romantic era.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Echoing Psalms 90:10: “The days of our years are threescore years and ten.”[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Probably the Duke of Wellington (1769–1852), who entered Tory politics after commanding the allied army that defeated Napoleon at Waterloo.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Flag that a ship raises to signal its immediate departure.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Without a penny.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Southcott (1750–1814) was a self-described religious prophet and founder of a working-class messianic movement.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Likely the Congress of Vienna in 1814, the series of international meetings that established Europe’s authoritarian post-Napoleonic order.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Probably referencing the Peterloo Massacre, also the subject of Percy Shelley’s “The Mask of Anarchy” (see p. 790, below). On August 16, 1819, thousands of supporters of political reform gathered on St. Peter’s Field in Manchester; the crowd was bloodily dispersed when the cavalry were ordered in, and in the mayhem at least nine were killed and hundreds injured.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Alluding to Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, Part 2 4.2.129, where Falstaff says that if he had sons he would advise them to swear off “thin potations.” John Bull—name for the archetypal Englishman—is doing the opposite and opting for the inferior beverage. Brewers often deceived their customers by adulterating their wares.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Latin: “seize the day.” From Horace’s *Odes* 1.2.8.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Rapacious female monster in classical mythology.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Citing, first, Macbeth, who says, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player” (5.4.24), and then Falstaff, who in *Henry IV*, Part 1 says, “Out, ye rogues! Play out the play” (2.4.467).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Referring to *Secret Memoirs and Manners of several Persons of Quality . . . from the New Atalantis* (1709), in which the early English novelist Delarivier Manley (1663–1724) satirically exposed, in thinly disguised form, the court scandals of her day.[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *government bonds*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *swindlers*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *caressed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wide-ranging*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *song*[Return to reference °](#)

# On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year

*Missolonghi, Jan. 22, 1824.*

## 1

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,  
Since others it hath ceased to move,  
Yet though I cannot be beloved,  
Still let me love!

## 2

5 My days are in the yellow leaf;  
The flowers and fruits of Love are gone;  
The worm, the canker, and the grief  
Are mine alone!

## 3

10 The fire that on my bosom preys  
Is lone as some volcanic isle;  
No torch is kindled at its blaze—  
A funeral pile!

## 4

15 The hope, the fear, the jealous care,  
The exalted portion of the pain  
And power of Love I cannot share,  
But wear the chain.

## 5

But 'tis not *thus*—and 'tis not *here*



Such thoughts should shake my Soul, nor *now*,  
Where Glory decks the hero's bier  
Or binds his brow.

20

**6**

The Sword—the Banner—and the Field—  
Glory and Greece around us see!  
The Spartan borne upon his shield  
Was not more free!

**7**

Awake! (not Greece—she *is* awake!)  
Awake, my Spirit! think through *whom*  
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake  
And then strike home!

25

**8**

Tread those reviving passions down,  
Unworthy Manhood;—unto thee  
Indifferent should the smile or frown  
Of Beauty be.

30

**9**

If thou regret'st thy youth, *why live?*  
The land of honourable Death  
Is here:—up to the Field! and give  
Away thy Breath.

35

**10**

Seek out—less often sought than found—  
A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best;  
Then look around and choose thy ground  
And take thy Rest.

40

# Romantic Literature and Wartime

By birth British Romantic authors were the fortunate inhabitants, as Shakespeare's John of Gaunt had declared, of a "sceptered isle" moated about by the sea. Home for them was at a safe distance from battlefields on the European continent, in the Americas, or in the West and East Indian colonies: since 1745–46, the years witnessing the quelling of the last of the Jacobite Rebellions, military conflict had almost by definition been something that did not take place on British ground. Nonetheless, the sense that no peace could or should be found in that home shaped in important ways Romantic authors' understanding of literature's public role. Romanticism was a wartime phenomenon. Between the outbreak of hostilities in 1793, which followed hard on the heels of Jacobin France's trial and execution of its former king, and the Duke of Wellington's victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, Britain and France waged an almost unrelenting war.

Invasion by France, much feared by inhabitants of the southeast of England particularly, never came to pass, but there were extended periods, in 1798 and 1803–04, when Napoleon's armies encamped on the Channel coast, only twenty-one miles from Dover, their flotillas of invasion barges readied. At these moments of high alert, cartoonists on the government payroll, such as James Gillray, did their gory best to evoke "the Promis'd Horrors of the French Invasion" and so ensure that those out of reach of the artillery were nonetheless bombarded with images of French atrocity. As William Wordsworth's "Discharged Soldier" suggests, for many civilians the distant conflicts also became more immediate whenever they encountered, "linger[ing] in the public ways," the numerous wounded veterans who survived their military duty but were reduced to vagrancy and beggary upon their return home. The sense of

foreboding aroused by the nameless soldier in Wordsworth's 1798 poem, survivor of "war and battle and . . . pestilence" in "the tropical isles," may register Wordsworth's fearful awareness that English rural society could not escape being affected by the militarism his government was exporting across the globe. This topic is meant to suggest, through examples like these, the many ways in which, between 1793 and 1815, war's violence came home to Englishmen and women's imaginations.

This intractable, twenty-two-year conflict represented a new kind of warfare. Certainly Britain had repeatedly been on a war footing during the eighteenth century, the most recent hostilities being those terminated by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. Britons' nationalism had developed in concert with their francophobia since the sixteenth century: as Catholic Other and rival for trade and later colonies, France had long occupied the role of Britain's archenemy. The conflict with the new French Republic that began in 1793 was, however, unprecedented in both scale and intensity—a dress rehearsal, historians say, for the "total war" of the twentieth century. It spanned the globe. It involved huge portions of the British population: the navy expanded by a factor of eight during these years, the army by a factor of six, and measures for civil defense adopted following the first invasion scare involved the formation of huge auxiliary forces of civilian volunteers. Ultimately one-sixth to one-fifth of the nation's adult men were enrolled in the armed forces. This level of mobilization would remain unmatched until World War I.

"The people became a participant in war; instead of governments and armies as heretofore, the full weight of the nation was thrown into the balance": the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz's retrospect on how the French Republic changed history by altering the conduct of war also applies to Britain, despite Britain's official opposition to the political innovations happening across the Channel. Though the wars Britain waged between 1793 and 1815 did enrich the empire with new overseas possessions (many former French colonies), the prospect of territorial expansion was not the principal

reason that this warfare had come to command “the full weight of the nation.” The support that ordinary people voluntarily lent to the war effort (not least by paying the high taxes that it required) instead demonstrated (or so loyalist propaganda proposed) Britons’ attachment to the constitution, or their wish to redeem the national character, which had become effete or addicted to luxury, or their hatred of Napoleonic tyranny.

The British Crown was quick to realize that the defense of the realm would also necessarily involve the management of public opinion. The government invested in an intensive campaign of communal festivity and patriotic pageantry—witness the five days of ceremonies, attended by tens of thousands, held when Admiral Horatio Nelson was laid to rest at St. Paul’s Cathedral, following his death at Trafalgar. Few people in British towns would have been able to remain aloof from this particular campaign, to feel that they could count on being left alone in peace or, for that matter, in quiet. Church bells were rung for victories; patriotic choruses of “God save the king” sometimes erupted, mid-performance, from the stalls of theaters; recruiting sergeants beat their drums as they trawled the streets looking to lure the local poor with enlistment bounties and promises of escape. (“I hate that drum’s discordant sound / Parading round and round and round,” John Scott’s much-reprinted poem on recruitment began; that drum beat is echoed in the opening of Anna Letitia Barbauld’s anti-war *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*.) An additional way in which the warfare that stepped forth in 1793 differed from wars of the past was that the hostilities with France both coincided with and fueled a rapid expansion of the newspaper industry. News of fleet movements, generals’ strategies, casualties, victories, and defeats was more intensely disseminated and reported than in previous conflicts, a fact that made the management of public opinion at once more urgent and more difficult. Battles waged in distant climes became news stories that were consumed in British parlors, amid middle-class families’ daily routines. “Boys and girls, / And women . . . all read of war, / the best amusement for our

morning meal!" Coleridge observed with consternation in "Fears of Solitude."

Of course, Romantic poetry and fiction were themselves part of this media blitz—war sold books as well as newspapers—though poems and novels did not so much broadcast war news as provide instruction as to how readers should feel about that news. That instruction changed over the course of the period. In the eighteenth century some thinkers had decried war as an absurd, archaic dueling that vainglorious monarchs engaged in at the expense of their subjects. (William Godwin repeats in *Political Justice* some biting lines from Jonathan Swift: "Sometimes the quarrel between two princes is to decide which of them shall possess a third of his dominions, where neither of them pretends to any right. Sometimes one prince quarrels with another, for fear the other should quarrel with him.") Critiques in this vein continued to circulate after 1793: profiling current war poetry in 1799 the reviewers for the *Anti-Jacobin Review* accused contemporary poets of keeping victory out of sight so as to emphasize war's pains, stating that "we are presented with nothing but contusions and amputations, plundered peasants and deserted looms." But antiwar poetry was soon overshadowed by the new accounts construing the battle against the French as a crusade for a holy cause or as a purifying ordeal that might bring about individual and national regeneration. Many nineteenth-century writers and readers reembraced the epic, a genre with a legacy of bloodlust, emphasizing war's glories and the opportunities for virile heroism battle afforded. Sir Walter Scott was at the forefront of this abandonment of what a reviewer called "the mild pacific tone" of modern poetry, for in his works, this reviewer said, he had assumed "the ancient function of a bard, to celebrate military prowess, and set off pride, ferocity, and revenge." Modern war was becoming a matter of mechanically drilled mass armies, each side aiming to dominate the other through sheer force of numbers, but in poems engaging a picturesque, premodern past—be they Scott's *Marmion* (1808) or Robert Southey's *Roderick, the Last*

*of the Goths* (1814)—martial might could step forth once again as a gloriously individual and impassioned thing.

## **WILLIAM GODWIN**

With its faith in the perfectibility of our political arrangements, the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) is now recognized as the exemplary statement of the utopianism of the 1790s: according to William Hazlitt, with this text William Godwin (1756–1836) “carried with him all the most sanguine and fearless understandings of the time.” The *Enquiry* distills an Enlightenment tradition of anti-war arguments as it traces how government, “once intended to suppress injustice,” now gives rise to “oppression, despotism, war, and conquest.”

# ***From Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness***

## ***From Of the Causes of War***

\* \* \*

One of the most essential principles of political justice is diametrically the reverse of that which impostors and patriots have too frequently agreed to recommend. Their perpetual exhortation has been, "Love your country. Sink the personal existence of individuals in the existence of the community. Make little account of the particular men of whom the society consists, but aim at the general wealth, prosperity and glory. Purify your mind from the gross ideas of sense, and elevate it to the single contemplation of that abstract individual of which particular men are so many detached members, valuable only for the place they fill."<sup>1</sup>

The lessons of reason on this head are precisely opposite. "Society is an ideal existence, and not on its own account entitled to the smallest regard. The wealth, prosperity and glory of the whole are unintelligible chimeras. Set no value on any thing, but in proportion as you are convinced of its tendency to make individual men happy and virtuous. Benefit by every practicable mode man wherever he exists; but be not deceived by the specious idea of affording services to a body of men, for which no individual man is the better. Society was instituted, not for the sake of glory, not to furnish splendid materials for the page of history, but for the benefit of its members. The love of our country, if we would speak accurately, is another of those specious illusions, which have been invented by impostors in order to render the multitude the blind instruments of their crooked designs."



Meanwhile let us beware of passing from one injurious extreme to another. Much of what has been usually understood by the love of our country is highly excellent and valuable, though perhaps nothing that can be brought within the strict interpretation of the phrase. A wise man will not fail to be the votary of liberty and equality. He will be ready to exert himself in their defence wherever they exist. It cannot be a matter of indifference to him, when his own liberty and that of other men with whose excellence and capabilities he has the best opportunity of being acquainted, are involved in the event of the struggle to be made. But his attachment will be to the cause, and not to the country. Wherever there are men who understand the value of political justice and are prepared to assert it, that is his country. Wherever he can most contribute to the diffusion of these principles and the real happiness of mankind, that is his country. Nor does he desire for any country any other benefit than justice.

\* \* \*

Because individuals were liable to error, and suffered their apprehensions of justice to be perverted by a bias in favour of themselves, government was instituted. Because nations were susceptible of a similar weakness, and could find no sufficient umpire to whom to appeal, war was introduced. Men were induced deliberately to seek each other's lives, and to adjudge the controversies between them, not according to the dictates of reason and justice, but as either should prove most successful in devastation and murder. This was no doubt in the first instance the extremity of exasperation and rage. But it has since been converted into a trade. One part of the nation pays another part to murder and be murdered in their stead; and the most trivial causes, a supposed insult or a sally of youthful ambition, have sufficed to deluge provinces with blood.

We can have no adequate idea of this evil, unless we visit, at least in imagination, a field of battle. Here men deliberately destroy each other by thousands without any resentment against or even

knowledge of each other. The plain is strewn with death in all its various forms. Anguish and wounds display the diversified modes in which they can torment the human frame. Towns are burned, ships are blown up in the air while the mangled limbs descend on every side, the fields are laid desolate, the wives of the inhabitants exposed to brutal insult, and their children driven forth to hunger and nakedness. It would be despicable to mention, along with these scenes of horror, and the total subversion of all ideas of moral justice they must occasion in the auditors and spectators, the immense treasures which are wrung in the form of taxes from those inhabitants whose residence is at a distance from the scene.

1793

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Here Godwin footnotes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762). [Return to reference 1](#)

## **WILLIAM WORDSWORTH**

This haunting poem, which Wordsworth composed in early 1798 (at around the time he was also working on "The Ruined Cottage"), was left unpublished during Wordsworth's lifetime, though he eventually incorporated the lines into *The Prelude*, book 4. There this disquieting meeting with a returned veteran of foreign wars interrupts the poet's account of his first summer vacation from college. Pestilence (line 138) afflicted many soldiers and sailors, especially those unlucky enough to see service in the West Indies. Epidemics of yellow fever, dysentery, and other diseases are estimated to have killed more servicemen than military encounters.

## The Discharged Soldier

I love to walk  
Along the public way when for the night,  
Deserted in its silence, it assumes  
A character of deeper quietness  
Than pathless solitudes. At such a time  
5 I slowly mounted up a steep ascent  
Where the road's watry surface to the ridge  
Of that sharp rising glittered in the moon  
And seemed before my eyes another stream  
Stealing with silent lapse to join the brook  
10 That murmured in the valley. On I passed  
Tranquil, receiving in my own despite  
Amusement, as I slowly passed along,  
From such near objects as from time to time  
Perforce disturbed the slumber of the sense  
15 Quiescent, and disposed to sympathy,  
With an exhausted mind worn out by toil  
And all unworthy of the deeper joy  
Which waits on distant prospect, cliff or sea,  
The dark blue vault, and universe of stars.  
20 Thus did I steal along that silent road,  
My body from the stillness drinking in  
A restoration like the calm of sleep  
But sweeter far. Above, before, behind,  
Around me, all was peace and solitude:  
25 I looked not round, nor did the solitude  
Speak to my eye, but it was heard and felt.  
Oh happy state! What beauteous pictures now  
Rose in harmonious imagery—they rose  
As from some distant region of my soul  
30 And came along like dreams, yet such as left

Obscurely mingled with their passing forms  
A consciousness of animal delight,  
A self-possession felt in every pause  
And every gentle movement of my frame.

35     While thus I wandered, step by step led on,  
It chanced a sudden turning of the road  
Presented to my view an uncouth shape  
So near that, stepping back into the shade  
Of a thick hawthorn, I could mark him well,  
40     Myself unseen. He was in stature tall,  
A foot above man's common measure tall,  
And lank, and upright. There was in his form  
A meagre stiffness. You might almost think  
That his bones wounded him. His legs were long,  
45     So long and shapeless that I looked at them  
Forgetful of the body they sustained.  
His arms were long and lean; his hands were bare;  
His visage, wasted though it seemed, was large  
In feature; his cheeks sunken; and his mouth  
50     Shewed ghastly in the moonlight. From behind  
A mile-stone propped him, and his figure seemed  
Half-sitting and half-standing. I could mark  
That he was clad in military garb,  
Though faded yet entire. His face was turned  
55     Towards the road, yet not as if he sought  
For any living thing. He appeared  
Forlorn and desolate, a man cut off  
From all his kind, and more than half detached  
From his own nature.

60                     He was alone,  
Had no attendant, neither dog, nor staff,  
Nor knapsack—in his very dress appeared  
A desolation, a simplicity  
That appertained to solitude. I think  
If but a glove had dangled in his hand  
It would have made him more akin to man.

65 Long time I scanned him with a mingled sense  
Of fear and sorrow. From his lips meanwhile  
There issued murmuring sounds as if of pain  
Or of uneasy thought; yet still his form  
70 Kept the same fearful steadiness. His shadow  
Lay at his feet and moved not. In a glen  
Hard by a village stood, whose silent doors  
Were visible among the scattered trees,  
Scarce distant from the spot an arrow's flight.  
75 I wished to see him move, but he remained  
Fixed to his place, and still from time to time  
Sent forth a murmuring voice of dead complaint,  
A groan scarce audible. Yet all the while  
The chained mastiff in his wooden house  
80 Was vexed, and from among the village trees  
Howled never ceasing. Not without reproach  
Had I prolonged my watch, and now confirmed,  
And my heart's specious cowardice subdued,  
I left the shady nook where I had stood  
85 And hailed the Stranger. From his resting-place  
He rose, and with his lean and wasted arm  
In measured gesture lifted to his head  
Returned my salutation. A short while  
I held discourse on things indifferent  
90 And casual matter. He meanwhile had ceased  
From all complaint—his station had resumed,  
Propped by the mile stone as before, and when  
erelong  
I asked his history, he in reply  
Was neither slow nor eager, but unmoved,  
95 And with a quiet uncomplaining voice,  
A stately air of mild indifference,  
He told a simple fact: that he had been  
A Soldier, to the tropic isles had gone,  
Whence he had landed now some ten days past;  
That on his landing he had been dismissed,

100 And with the little strength he yet had left  
Was travelling to regain his native home.  
At this I turned and through the trees looked down  
105 Into the village—all were gone to rest,  
Nor smoke nor any taper light appeared,  
But every silent window to the moon  
Shone with a yellow glitter. 'No one there,'  
Said I, 'is waking; we must measure back  
110 The way which we have come. Behind yon wood  
A labourer dwells, an honest man and kind;  
He will not murmur should we break his rest,  
And he will give you food if food you need,  
And lodging for the night.' At this he stooped,  
115 And from the ground took up an oaken staff  
By me yet unobserved, a traveller's staff,  
Which I suppose from his slack hand had dropped,  
And, such the languor of the weary man,  
Had lain till now neglected in the grass,  
120 But not forgotten. Back we turned and shaped  
Our course toward the cottage. He appeared  
To travel without pain, and I beheld  
With ill-suppressed astonishment his tall  
And ghostly figure moving at my side.  
As we advanced I asked him for what cause  
125 He tarried there, nor had demanded rest  
At inn or cottage. He replied, 'In truth  
My weakness made me loth to move, and here  
I felt myself at ease and much relieved,  
But that the village mastiff fretted me,  
130 And every second moment rang a peal  
Felt at my very heart. There was no noise,  
Nor any foot abroad—I do not know  
What ailed him, but it seemed as if the dog  
Were howling to the murmur of the stream.'  
135 While thus we travelled on I did not fail  
To question him of what he had endured

From war and battle and the pestilence.  
He all the while was in demeanor calm,  
Concise in answer: solemn and sublime  
140 He might have seemed, but that in all he said  
There was a strange half-absence and a tone  
Of weakness and indifference, as of one  
Remembering the importance of his theme,  
But feeling it no longer. We advanced  
145 Slowly, and ere we to the wood were come  
Discourse had ceased. Together on we passed  
In silence through the shades gloomy and dark,  
Then turning up along an open field  
We gained the cottage. At the door I knocked,  
150 And called aloud, 'My Friend, here is a man  
By sickness overcome; beneath your roof  
This night let him find rest, and give him food—  
The service if need be I will requite.'  
Assured that now my comrade would repose  
155 In comfort, I entreated that henceforth  
He would not linger in the public ways  
But at the door of cottage or of inn  
Demand the succour which his state required,  
And told him, feeble as he was 'twere fit  
160 He asked relief or alms. At this reproof  
With the same ghastly mildness in his look  
He said, 'My trust is in the God of heaven,  
And in the eye of him that passes me.'  
By this the labourer had unlocked the door,  
165 And now my comrade touched his hat again  
With his lean hand, and in a voice that seemed  
To speak with a reviving interest  
Till then unfelt, he thanked me. I returned  
The blessing of the poor unhappy man,  
170 And so we parted.



## SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

"We now read with listless unconcern of events which, but a very few years ago, would have filled all Europe with astonishment," Coleridge wrote in the the *Morning Post* newspaper, an insight into public apathy that he develops at length in this poem of crisis.

"Fears in Solitude" (1798; first published in the same volume as "Frost at Midnight") is often read as documenting a pivotal moment in Coleridge's political allegiances: here the radical, known for his enthusiasm for the French Revolution and opposition to war, presents himself as patriot.

## ***From Fears in Solitude***

***Written in April 1798, during the Alarm of an Invasion***

A green and silent spot, amid the hills,  
A small and silent dell! O'er stiller place  
No singing sky-lark ever poised himself.  
The hills are heathy, save that swelling slope,  
Which hath a gay and gorgeous covering on,  
5 All golden with the never-bloomless furze,  
Which now blooms most profusely: but the dell,  
Bathed by the mist, is fresh and delicate  
As vernal corn-field, or the unripe flax,  
When, through its half-transparent stalks, at eve,  
10 The level sunshine glimmers with green light.  
Oh! 'tis a quiet spirit-healing nook!  
Which all, methinks, would love; but chiefly he,  
The humble man, who, in his youthful years,  
Knew just so much of folly, as had made  
15 His early manhood more securely wise!  
Here he might lie on fern or withered heath,  
While from the singing lark (that sings unseen  
The minstrelsy that solitude loves best),  
And from the sun, and from the breezy air,  
20 Sweet influences trembled o'er his frame;  
And he, with many feelings, many thoughts,  
Made up a meditative joy, and found  
Religious meanings in the forms of nature!  
And so, his senses gradually wrapt  
25 In a half sleep, he dreams of better worlds,  
And dreaming hears thee still, O singing lark,  
That singest like an angel in the clouds!

My God! It is a melancholy thing  
For such a man, who would full fain preserve  
30 His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel  
For all his human brethren—O my God!  
It weighs upon the heart, that he must think  
What uproar and what strife may now be stirring  
This way or that way o'er these silent hills—  
35 Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,  
And all the crash of onset; fear and rage,  
And undetermined conflict—even now,  
Even now, perchance, and in his native isle;  
Carnage and groans beneath this blessed sun!  
40 We have offended, Oh! My countrymen!  
We have offended very grievously  
And been most tyrannous.

\* \* \*

Thankless too for  
peace,  
(Peace long preserved by fleets and perilous seas)  
Secure from actual warfare, we have loved  
To swell the war-whoop, passionate for war!  
Alas! for ages ignorant of all  
90 Its ghastlier workings, (famine or blue plague,  
Battle, or siege, or flight through wintry snows,)  
We, this whole people, have been clamorous  
For war and bloodshed; animating sports,  
The which we pay for as a thing to talk of,  
95 Spectators and not combatants! No guess  
Anticipative of a wrong unfelt,  
No speculation on contingency,  
However dim and vague, too vague and dim  
To yield a justifying cause; and forth,

100 (Stuffed out with big preamble, holy names,  
And adjurations of the God in Heaven,) We send our mandates for the certain death  
Of thousands and ten thousands! Boys and girls,  
105 And women, that would groan to see a child  
Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war,  
The best amusement for our morning meal!  
The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers  
From curses, who knows scarcely words enough  
110 To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,  
Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute  
And technical in victories and defeats,  
And all our dainty terms for fratricide;  
Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues  
Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which  
115 We join no feeling and attach no form!  
As if the soldier died without a wound;  
As if the fibres of this godlike frame  
Were gored without a pang; as if the wretch,  
Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,  
120 Passed off to Heaven, translated and not killed;  
As though he had no wife to pine for him,  
No God to judge him! Therefore, evil days  
Are coming on us, O my countrymen!  
And what if all-avenging Providence,  
125 Strong and retributive, should make us know  
The meaning of our words, force us to feel  
The desolation and the agony  
Of our fierce doings?

Spare us yet awhile,  
Father and God! O! spare us yet awhile!

130 Oh! Let not English women drag their flight  
Fainting beneath the burthen of their babes,  
Of the sweet infants, that but yesterday  
Laughed at the breast! Sons, brothers, husbands, all  
Who ever gazed with fondness on the forms

135 Which grew up with you round the same fire-side,  
And all who ever heard the sabbath-bells  
Without the infidel's scorn, make yourselves pure!  
Stand forth! be men! repel an impious foe,  
140 Impious and false, a light yet cruel race,  
Who laugh away all virtue, mingling mirth  
With deeds of murder; and still promising  
Freedom, themselves too sensual to be free,  
Poison life's amities, and cheat the heart  
145 Of faith and quiet hope, and all that soothes,  
And all that lifts the spirit! Stand we forth;  
Render them back upon the insulted ocean,  
And let them toss as idly on its waves  
As the vile sea-weed, which some mountain-blast  
Swept from our shores! And oh! may we return  
150 Not with a drunken triumph, but with fear,  
Repenting of the wrongs with which we stung  
So fierce a foe to frenzy!

\* \* \*

## ROBERT SOUTHEY

Antiwar verse of the 1790s often pits collective celebration against individual mourning in the manner of "The Victory," which Robert Southey (1774–1843), at that point still a political radical, published in his *Poems* of 1799. The devastation of the war widow who learns only belatedly of her husband's death, having listened at first to the tidings "with dreadful hope," also appears frequently in poetry from this decade.

# The Victory

Hark—how the church-bells thundering harmony  
Stuns the glad ear! tidings of joy have come,  
Good tidings of great joy! two gallant ships  
Met on the element,—they met, they fought  
A desperate fight!—good tidings of great joy!  
5 Old England triumphed! yet another day  
Of glory for the ruler of the waves!  
For those who fell, 'twas in their country's cause,  
They have their passing paragraphs of praise  
And are forgotten.

10                               There was one who died  
In that day's glory, whose obscurer name  
No proud historian's page will chronicle.  
Peace to his honest soul! I read his name,  
'Twas in the list of slaughter, and blest God  
The sound was not familiar to mine ear.  
15 But it was told me after that this man  
Was one whom lawful violence<sup>1</sup> had forced  
From his own home and wife and little ones,  
Who by his labour lived; that he was one  
Whose uncorrupted heart could keenly feel  
20 A husband's love, a father's anxiousness,  
That from the wages of his toil he fed  
The distant dear ones, and would talk of them  
At midnight when he trod the silent deck  
With him he valued, talk of them, of joys  
25 That he had known—oh God! and of the hour  
When they should meet again, till his full heart  
His manly heart at last would overflow  
Even like a child's with very tenderness.  
Peace to his honest spirit! Suddenly





## MARY ROBINSON

On July 18, 1800, in a ceremony lasting three hours and attracting numerous civilian spectators, George III inspected the thirty-two thousand troops assembled near his royal residence at Windsor. Twelve days later, in the the *Morning Post* newspaper, Mary Robinson (1757?–1800) published this poetic catalog memorializing the “hurly-burly” of the day. The poem was reprinted in 1804 with the title “Winkfield Plain: or a Description of a Camp in the Year 1800.” In her novel *Pride and Prejudice* (published 1813, but drafted in the late 1790s) Jane Austen would also turn her satiric gaze on the social and sexual disruptions engendered by the wartime economy. She might have had Robinson’s poem in view as she detailed the daydreams the novel’s irrepressible flirt Lydia Bennet indulges about Brighton, site of another military encampment: “She saw all the glories of the c its tents stretched forth in beauteous uniformity of lines, crowded with the young and the gay, and dazzling with scarlet; and to complete the view, she saw herself seated beneath a tent, tenderly flirting with at least six officers at once.”

# The Camp

Tents, *marquees*, and baggage waggons;  
Suttling houses,<sup>1</sup> beer in flaggons;  
Drums and trumpets, singing, firing;  
Girls seducing, *beaux* admiring;  
Country lasses gay and smiling,  
5 City lads their hearts beguiling;  
Dusty roads, and horses frisky;  
Many an *Eton boy* in whisky,<sup>2</sup>  
Tax'd carts full of farmer's daughters;  
Brutes condemn'd, and man—who slaughters!  
10 Public-houses, booths, and castles;  
*Belles* of fashion, serving vassals;  
Lordly Gen'als fiercely staring,  
Weary soldiers, sighing, swearing!  
*Petit maitres*<sup>3</sup> always dressing—  
15 In the glass themselves caressing;  
Perfum'd, painted, patch'd and blooming  
Ladies—manly airs assuming!  
Dowagers of fifty, simp'ring  
Misses, for a lover whimp'ring—  
20 Husbands drill'd to household tameness;  
Dames heart sick of wedded sameness.  
Princes setting girls a-madding—  
Wives for ever fond of gadding—  
Princesses with lovely faces,  
25 Beauteous children of the Graces!  
Britain's pride and Virtue's treasure,  
Fair and gracious, beyond measure!  
*Aid de Camps*, and youthful pages—  
Prudes, and vestals<sup>4</sup> of all ages!—  
Old coquets, and matrons surly,

30 Sounds of distant *hurly burly*!  
 Mingled voices uncouth singing;  
 Carts, full laden, forage bringing;  
 35 Sociables,<sup>3</sup> and horses weary;  
 Houses warm, and dresses airy;  
 Loads of fatten'd poultry; pleasure  
 Serv'd (TO NOBLES) without measure.  
 Doxies<sup>4</sup> who the waggons follow;  
 Beer, for thirsty hinds<sup>o</sup> to swallow;  
 40 Washerwomen, fruit-girls cheerful,  
 ANTIENT LADIES—*chaste* and *fearful*!  
 Tradesmen, leaving shops, and seeming  
 More of *war* than profit dreaming;  
 Martial sounds, and braying asses;  
 45 Noise, that ev'ry noise surpasses!  
 All confusion, din, and riot—  
 NOTHING CLEAN—and NOTHING QUIET.

1800

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Establishments selling supplies to soldiers.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Besides being a drink, a whisky was a fashionable two-wheeled carriage. Eton, the famous public school, is in Windsor.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Carriages with facing seats.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Mistresses, perhaps sex workers.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *fops*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *virgins*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *farm boys*[Return to reference °](#)

## ANNA LETITIA BARBAULD

Barbauld's bitter poem on the moral and economic condition of England in the year 1811, written at a moment when it seemed that the nation's wars with France might be protracted interminably, concludes by imagining the end of the British Empire. The historian of the future will see "Europe sit in dust, as Asia now" (line 126), and England will at that future moment be a mere memory, at best representing for America what Greece and Rome in the nineteenth century represent for England. The poem, published in 1812, was both one of the most widely reviewed of Barbauld's works and the most reviled: the reviewer for the Tory *Quarterly Review* sniped, "We had hoped . . . that the empire might have been saved without the intervention of a lady-author . . . we must take the liberty of warning her to desist from satire, which indeed is satire on herself alone."

## ***From Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a Poem***

Still the loud death drum, thundering from afar,  
O'er the vext nations pours the storm of war:  
To the stern call still Britain bends her ear,  
Feeds the fierce strife, the alternate hope and fear;  
5 Bravely, though vainly, dares to strive with Fate,  
And seeks by turns to prop each sinking state.  
Colossal Power with overwhelming force  
Bears down each fort of Freedom in its course;  
Prostrate she lies beneath the Despot's<sup>1</sup> sway,  
10 While the hushed nations curse him—and obey.  
Bounteous in vain, with frantic man at strife,  
Glad Nature pours the means—the joys of life;  
In vain with orange blossoms scents the gale,  
The hills with olives clothes, with corn the vale;  
15 Man calls to Famine, nor invokes in vain,  
Disease and Rapine follow in her train;  
The tramp of marching hosts disturbs the plough,  
The sword, not sickle, reaps the harvest now,  
And where the Soldier gleans the scant supply,  
20 The helpless Peasant but retires to die;  
No laws his hut from licensed outrage shield,  
And war's least horror is the ensanguined field.  
Fruitful in vain, the matron counts with pride  
The blooming youths that grace her honoured side;  
25 No son returns to press her widow'd hand,  
Her fallen blossoms strew a foreign strand.  
—Fruitful in vain, she boasts her virgin race,  
Whom cultured arts adorn and gentlest grace;  
Defrauded of its homage, Beauty mourns,

30 And the rose withers on its virgin thorns.  
Frequent, some stream obscure, some uncouth  
name  
By deeds of blood is lifted into fame;  
Oft o'er the daily page some soft-one bends  
To learn the fate of husband, brothers, friends,  
Or the spread map with anxious eye explores,  
35 Its dotted boundaries and penciled shores,  
Asks *where* the spot that wrecked her bliss is found,  
And learns its name but to detest the sound.  
And thinks't thou, Britain, still to sit at ease,  
An island Queen amidst thy subject seas,  
40 While the vext billows, in their distant roar,  
But soothe thy slumbers, and but kiss thy shore?  
To sport in wars, while danger keeps aloof,  
Thy grassy turf unbruised by hostile hoof?  
So sing thy flatterers; but, Britain, know,  
45 Thou who hast shared the guilt must share the woe.  
Nor distant is the hour; low murmurs spread,  
And whispered fears, creating what they dread;  
Ruin, as with an earthquake shock, is here,  
There, the heart-witherings of unuttered fear,  
50 And that sad death, whence most affection bleeds,  
Which sickness, only of the soul, precedes.  
Thy baseless wealth dissolves in air away,  
Like mists that melt before the morning ray:  
No more on crowded mart or busy street  
55 Friends, meeting friends, with cheerful hurry greet;  
Sad, on the ground thy princely merchants bend  
Their altered looks, and evil days portend,  
And fold their arms, and watch with anxious breast  
The tempest blackening in the distant West.<sup>2</sup>  
60 Yes, thou must droop; thy Midas dream is o'er;  
The golden tide of Commerce leaves thy shore,  
Leaves thee to prove the alternate ills that haunt

65            Enfeebling Luxury and ghastly Want;  
              Leaves thee, perhaps, to visit distant lands,  
              And deal the gifts of Heaven with equal hands.

\* \* \*

1812

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Napoleon's. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: War with the United States was imminent. [Return to reference 2](#)

## GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON

In canto VIII (1823) of *Don Juan*, following an escape from the Turkish harem into which he was sold in the fifth canto, the fictional hero's fortunes take him into a real theater of war. He joins the Russian army and participates in the conquest of Ismail (1790): the Turkish forces defending that city had been ordered to stand their ground, and 40,000 of them are thought to have been killed in the siege. These military adventures, Byron's narrator suggests, perhaps with excessive candor, fulfill the generic contract that he, as participant in a literary tradition begun by Homer, made with his reader back in canto I: as these adventures have been "all very accurate, you must allow / And *Epic*" (stanza 138), the poet has kept his side of the bargain. But the epic premise that "glory's a great thing" (stanza 14) appears to hold truer in canto VIII for bards who sing of battlefields (and win government pensions by doing so) than for troops who fight and die on them.



## ***From Don Juan, Canto VIII***

\* \* \*

### **12**

Three hundred cannon threw up their emetic,  
And thirty thousand muskets flung their pills  
90 Like hail to make a bloody diuretic.  
Mortality, thou hast thy monthly bills.  
Thy plagues, thy famines, thy physicians yet tick  
Like the deathwatch within our ears the ills  
Past, present, and to come, but all may yield  
95 To the true portrait of one battlefield.

### **13**

There the still varying pangs, which multiply  
Until their very number makes men hard  
By the infinities of agony,  
Which meet the gaze, whate'er it may regard—  
100 The groan, the roll in dust, the all-white eye  
Turned back within its socket—these reward  
Your rank and file by thousands, while the rest  
May win perhaps a ribbon at the breast!

### **14**

Yet I love glory—glory's a great thing.  
105 Think what it is to be in your old age  
Maintained at the expense of your good king.  
A moderate pension shakes full many a sage,  
And heroes are but made for bards to sing,

110 Which is still better. Thus in verse to wage  
Your wars eternally, besides enjoying  
Half-pay for life, makes mankind worth destroying.

## 15

The troops already disembarked pushed on  
To take a battery on the right; the others  
Who landed lower down, their landing done,  
115 Had set to work as briskly as their brothers.  
Being grenadiers they mounted one by one,  
Cheerful as children climb the breasts of mothers,  
O'er the entrenchment and the palisade,  
Quite orderly, as if upon parade.  
120

## 16

And this was admirable, for so hot  
The fire was, that were red Vesuvius loaded,  
Besides its lava, with all sorts of shot  
And shells or hells, it could not more have goaded.  
Of officers a third fell on the spot,  
125 A thing which victory by no means boded  
To gentlemen engaged in the assault.  
Hounds, when the huntsman tumbles, are at fault.

## 17

But here I leave the general concern,  
To track our hero on his path of fame.  
130 He must his laurels separately earn;  
For fifty thousand heroes, name by name,  
Though all deserving equally to turn  
A couplet, or an elegy to claim,  
Would form a lengthy lexicon of glory  
135 And what is worse still, a much longer story.

## 18

And therefore we must give the greater number  
To the *Gazette*, which doubtless fairly dealt  
By the deceased, who lie in famous slumber  
In ditches, fields, or wheresoe'er they felt  
140 Their clay for the last time their souls encumber.  
Thrice happy he whose name has been well spelt  
In the dispatch; I knew a man whose loss  
Was printed Grove, although his name was Grose.

## 19

Juan and Johnson joined a certain corps  
145 And fought away with might and main, not  
knowing  
The way, which they had never trod before,  
And still less guessing where they might be going,  
But on they marched, dead bodies trampling o'er,  
Firing and thrusting, slashing, sweating, glowing,  
150 But fighting thoughtlessly enough to win  
To their *two* selves *one* whole bright bulletin.

## 20

Thus on they wallowed in the bloody mire  
Of dead and dying thousands, sometimes gaining  
A yard or two of ground, which brought them nigher  
155 To some odd angle for which all were straining;  
At other times, repulsed by the close fire,  
Which really poured as if all hell were raining,  
Instead of heaven, they stumbled backwards o'er  
A wounded comrade, sprawling in his gore.  
160

## 21

Though 'twas Don Juan's first of fields, and though

165       The nightly muster and the silent march  
In the chill dark, when courage does not glow  
          So much as under a triumphal arch,  
Perhaps might make him shiver, yawn, or throw  
          A glance on the dull clouds (as thick as starch,  
Which stiffened heaven) as if he wished for day;  
Yet for all this he did not run away.

\* \* \*

1823

# PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

## 1792–1822

Percy Bysshe Shelley, radical in every aspect of his life and thought, emerged from a solidly conservative background. His ancestors had been Sussex aristocrats since early in the seventeenth century; his grandfather, Sir Bysshe Shelley, made himself the richest man in Horsham, Sussex; his father, Timothy Shelley, was a hardheaded and conventional member of Parliament. Percy Shelley was in line for a baronetcy and, as befitted his station, was sent to be educated at Eton and Oxford. As a youth he was slight of build, eccentric in manner, and unskilled in sports or fighting and, as a consequence, was mercilessly bullied by older and stronger boys. He later said that he saw the petty tyranny of schoolmasters and schoolmates as representative of man's general inhumanity to man, and dedicated his life to a war against injustice and oppression. As he described the experience in the Dedication to *Laon and Cythna*:

So without shame, I spake:—"I will be wise,  
And just, and free, and mild, if in me lies  
Such power, for I grow weary to behold  
The selfish and the strong still tyrannise  
Without reproach or check." I then controuled  
My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and  
bold.

At Oxford in the autumn of 1810, Shelley's closest friend was Thomas Jefferson Hogg, a self-centered, self-confident young man who shared Shelley's love of philosophy and scorn of orthodoxy. Shelley at this early date had already published, anonymously, two Gothic novels and three slim volumes of verse, including his recently rediscovered *Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things*, an antiwar poem in heroic couplets. With Hogg he collaborated on a pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*, which claimed that God's existence cannot be proved on empirical grounds, and, provocatively, the co-authors mailed it to the bishops and heads of the colleges at Oxford. Shelley refused to repudiate the document and, to his shock and grief, was peremptorily expelled, terminating a university career that had lasted only six months. This event opened a breach between Shelley and his father that widened over the years.

Shelley went to London, where he took up the cause of Harriet Westbrook, the pretty and warmhearted daughter of a well-to-do tavern keeper, whose father, Shelley wrote to Hogg, "has persecuted her in a most horrible way by endeavoring to compel her to go to school." Harriet threw herself on Shelley's protection, and "gratitude and admiration," he wrote, "all demand that I shall love her *forever*." He eloped with Harriet to Edinburgh and married her, against his conviction that marriage was a tyrannical and degrading social institution. He was then eighteen years of age; his bride, sixteen. The couple moved restlessly from place to place, living on a small allowance granted reluctantly by their families. In February 1812, accompanied by Harriet's sister Eliza, they traveled to Dublin to distribute Shelley's *Address to the Irish People* and otherwise take part in the movement for Catholic emancipation and for the amelioration of that oppressed and poverty-stricken people.

Back in London Shelley eagerly sought the acquaintance of the radical novelist and philosopher William Godwin, author of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), and in 1813 he published his first important work, *Queen Mab, A Philosophical Poem*, which owes much to Godwin's optimistic conviction in *Political Justice* that the regeneration of the human species was at hand and that in these

modern times “the phalanx of reason” would prove “invulnerable” in its advance. In Shelley’s long poem, which he printed at his own expense, so as to maneuver around blasphemy and sedition laws, the fairy Queen Mab reveals to a journeying soul visions of the woeful past, a dreadful present, and a utopian future. Queen Mab’s denunciations of institutional religion, aristocracy, and monarchy are elaborated at length in the poem’s many endnotes. These atheistic and revolutionary sentiments made Shelley infamous for the rest of his life. They also, somewhat to his embarrassment in later life, came to the attention of the radical press, which kept *Queen Mab* in print, in cheap, pirated editions, for the rest of the century.

In the following spring Shelley, who had drifted away from Harriet, fell in love with Godwin’s and the late Mary Wollstonecraft’s beautiful and intelligent daughter, Mary. Convinced that cohabitation without love was immoral, he abandoned Harriet, fled to France with Mary (taking along her stepsister, Claire Clairmont), and—in accordance with his belief in nonexclusive love—invited Harriet to come live with them as another sister. Shelley’s elopement with Mary outraged her father, even though his own views of marriage had once been, on the testimony of *Political Justice*, no less radical than Shelley’s and even though Shelley, despite his own financial difficulties, had earlier taken over Godwin’s substantial debts. When he returned to London, Shelley found that the public, his family, and many friends regarded him as not only an atheist and a revolutionist but also a libertine. When two years later Harriet, pregnant by an unknown lover, drowned herself in a fit of despair, the courts denied Shelley the custody of their two children. (His first child with Mary Godwin had died earlier, only twelve days after her birth in February 1815.) Percy and Mary married in December 1816, and in spring 1818 they moved to Italy.

In Italy Shelley resumed his restless way of life, evading the people to whom he owed money by moving from town to town and house to house. His health was usually bad. Although the death of his grandfather in 1815 had provided a substantial income, he dissipated so much of it by his warmhearted but imprudent support

of Godwin and other needy acquaintances that he was constantly short of funds. Within a year of their arrival in Italy, the Shelleys lost two children to illness: their infant daughter Clara (b. 1817) died from dysentery in Venice in September 1818, and their son William died, aged three, in Rome the following June. Grief over these deaths destroyed the earlier harmony of the Shelleys' marriage; the birth in November 1819 of another son, Percy Florence (their only child to survive to adulthood), was not enough to mend the rift.

In these circumstances Shelley wrote his greatest works. Exile from England prompted him, on the one hand, to envision himself as an alien and outcast, bereft of an audience, and rejected by the human race to whose welfare he had dedicated his powers. It also prompted him, on the other hand, to imagine and, to a lesser extent, initiate new kinds of intellectual alliances and forms of ethical and political community, ambitions manifested in his friendship with Lord Byron and in the invitations to join him in Italy that he extended to Keats, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Peacock, and others. The poems of 1819–21, so rich and complex in part because they often seek to reconcile these conflicting accounts of the poetic self in relation to community, include (from 1819 alone) *Prometheus Unbound*, an epic-scale "lyrical drama" (meant to be read rather than performed) about the Greek Titan's survival and transcendence of oppression; his Jacobean-style revenge tragedy of incest and parricide, *The Cenci*; his visionary call for revolution, *The Mask of Anarchy*; a witty satire on Wordsworth, *Peter Bell the Third*; a penetrating, proto-Marxist essay, "A Philosophical View of Reform"; and numerous lyric poems. Later came "A Defence of Poetry"; *Epipsychidion*, a rhapsodic view of love as a spiritual union beyond earthly limits; *Adonais*, his elegy on Keats, representing the younger poet as a victim of a politicized review culture; and *Hellas*, a lyrical drama inspired by the Greek war for liberation from the Ottoman Empire.

These writings are enriched by Shelley's omnivorous reading, in the natural sciences, ancient and modern philosophy, Dante, Milton, the Bible—reading that he carried on, as his friend Hogg said, "in



season and out of season, at table, in bed, and especially during a walk" until he became one of the most erudite of the English poets. In particular the late works often evince Shelley's study of Plato (whose *Ion* and *Symposium* he translated) and of the Neoplatonists. The Platonic division of the cosmos into two worlds—the ordinary world of change, mortality, evil, and suffering, which is contrasted with the ideal world of perfect and eternal forms, of which the world of sense experience is only a distant and illusory reflection—was immensely attractive to Shelley. His *Adonais* set out that contrast memorably: "Life like a dome of many-coloured glass / Stains the white radiance of eternity" (lines 462–63). At the same time, however, the idealism these lines register as they evoke a beauty that is offset by the "stain" of temporal existence was often, within Shelley's late writings, tempered by his enthusiastic study of British empiricist philosophy, which limits knowledge to what is given in sense experience, and tempered, especially, by the affinities he felt for the radical skepticism of David Hume. Works such as "Mont Blanc" are shaped by his sense that there are narrow limits to what human beings can know with certainty. Out of this divided intellectual inheritance, Shelley developed, some critics have proposed, a "skeptical idealism," an attitude that also colors the hopes for radical social and political reform that he retained even at a historical moment that seemed (with the restoration of the old autocratic monarchies after 1815, with the suffering of the poor in the economic depression that followed the end of the war) to have delivered an insurmountable setback to the cause of liberty. For him such hopes were moral obligations, more than they were expressions of intellectual certainty. We must continue to hope because, by keeping open the possibility of a better future, hope releases the imaginative and creative powers that are the only means of achieving that end. Shelley had a motto in Italian inscribed on a ring that he often wore: "Il buon tempo verra" ("the good time will come").

When in 1820 the Shelleys settled finally at Pisa, he came closer to finding contentment than at any other time in his adult life. A

group of friends, Shelley's "Pisan Circle," gathered around them, including for a while Byron and the swashbuckling Cornishman Edward Trelawny. Chief in Shelley's affections were Edward Williams, a retired lieutenant of a cavalry regiment serving in India, and his common-law wife Jane, with whom Shelley became infatuated and to whom he addressed some of his best lyrics and verse letters. The end came suddenly, and in a way prefigured uncannily in the last stanza of *Adonais*, in which he had described his spirit as a ship driven by a violent storm out into the dark unknown. On July 8, 1822, Shelley and Edward Williams were sailing their open boat, the *Don Juan*, on the Gulf of Spezia. A violent squall swamped the boat. When several days later the bodies were washed ashore, they were cremated, and Shelley's ashes were buried in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome, near the graves of John Keats and William Shelley, the poet's young son.

Shelley's character has been the subject of heated and contradictory estimates, and commentators have also disagreed, analogously, in their assessments of his success at mixing politics and poetry. The actions that he justified to himself because they were true to his convictions often led to disastrous consequences for those near him, especially women; and even recent scholars, while repudiating the vicious attacks made by Shelley's contemporaries, attribute some of those actions to a self-assured egotism that masked itself as idealism. Yet Byron, who knew Shelley intimately, and did not readily pay compliments, wrote to his publisher John Murray, in response to attacks on Shelley at the time of his death: "You are all brutally mistaken about Shelley, who was, without exception, the *best* and least selfish man I ever knew." Vilified by the Tory press during his lifetime, Shelley's politics recommended his poetry to many later political radicals: the Chartists in the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels at the end, and at the start of the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi and many guiding lights of the British Labour Party. And, despite their ideological differences, Wordsworth recognized early on the extent to which Shelley in that poetry had expanded English versification's metrical and stanzaic

resources: "Shelley," Wordsworth said, "is one of the best *artists* of us all."

The texts here are those prepared by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat for *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition*, 2nd ed. (2001); Reiman also edited for this anthology a few poems not included in that edition.

# Mutability

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;  
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,  
Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon  
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

5 Or like forgotten lyres,<sup>o</sup> whose dissonant strings  
Give various response to each varying blast,  
To whose frail frame no second motion brings  
One mood or modulation like the last.

10 We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep;  
We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the  
day;  
We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep;  
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:

15 It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,  
The path of its departure still is free:  
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;  
Nought may endure but Mutability.

ca. 1814–15

1816

## Notes

- <sup>o</sup>: *wind harps* [Return to reference <sup>o</sup>](#)

## To Wordsworth<sup>1</sup>

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know  
That things depart which never may return:  
Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,  
Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.  
5 These common woes I feel. One loss is mine  
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.  
Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine  
On some frail bark<sup>o</sup> in winter's midnight roar:  
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood  
10 Above the blind and battling multitude:  
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave  
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,<sup>2</sup>—  
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,  
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

ca. 1814–15

1816

### Endnotes

- Note 1: Shelley's grieved comment on the poet of nature and of social radicalism after his views had become conservative. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Perhaps an allusion to "Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty," the title that Wordsworth gave to the section of sonnets such as "London, 1802" when he republished them in his *Poems* of 1807. [Return to reference 2](#)

### Notes

- °: *small ship* [Return to reference °](#)

## **Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude** Shelley

wrote *Alastor* in the fall and early winter of 1815 and published it in March 1816. According to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, the poet was "at a loss for a title, and I proposed that which he adopted: *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*. The Greek word *Alastor* is an evil genius. . . . I mention the true meaning of the word because many have supposed *Alastor* to be the name of the hero" (*Memoirs of Shelley*). Peacock's definition of an *alastor* as "an evil genius" has compounded the problems in interpreting this work: the term *evil* does not seem to fit the attitude expressed within the poem toward the protagonist's solitary quest, the poem seems to clash with statements in Shelley's preface, and the first and second paragraphs of the preface seem inconsistent with each other. These problems, however, may be largely resolved if we recognize that, in this early achievement (he was only twenty-three when he wrote *Alastor*), Shelley established his characteristic procedure of working with multiple perspectives. Both preface and poem explore alternative and conflicting possibilities in what Shelley calls "doubtful knowledge"—matters that are humanly essential but in which no certainty is humanly possible.

By the term *allegorical* in the opening sentence of his preface, Shelley seems to mean that his poem, like medieval and Renaissance allegories such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, represents an aspiration in the spiritual realm by the allegorical vehicle of a journey and quest in the material world. As Shelley's first paragraph outlines, the poem's protagonist, for whom objects in the natural world "cease to suffice," commits himself to the search for a female Other who will fulfill his intellectual, imaginative, and sensuous needs. The second paragraph of the preface, by contrast, passes judgment on the visionary protagonist in terms of the values of "actual men"—that is, the requirements of human and social life in this world. From this point of view, the visionary has been "avenged" (punished) for turning away from community in pursuit of his individual psychic needs. The diversity of attitudes expressed within the poem becomes easier to understand

if, on the basis of the many echoes of Wordsworth in the opening invocation, we identify the narrator of the story as a Wordsworthian poet for whom the natural world is sufficient to satisfy both the demands of his imagination and his need for community. This narrative poet, it can be assumed, undertakes to tell compassionately, but from his own perspective, the history of a nameless visionary who has surrendered everything in the quest for a goal beyond possibility.

In this early poem, Shelley establishes a form, a conceptual frame, and the imagery for the Romantic quest that he reiterated in his later poems and that also served as a paradigm for many other poems, from Byron's *Manfred* and Keats's *Endymion* to the quest poems of Shelley's later admirer William Butler Yeats. At the same time, in presenting a protagonist who journeys farther and farther east, from Greece onward to Jerusalem and then India, *Alastor* also prefigures story lines that Victorian adventure novels would construct for their empire-building heroes.

# **Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude**

## ***Preface***

The poem entitled "ALASTOR," may be considered as allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind. It represents a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. He drinks deep of the fountains of knowledge, and is still insatiate. The magnificence and beauty of the external world sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and affords to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted. So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves. Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. The intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense, have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings. The Poet is represented as uniting these requisitions, and attaching them to a single image.<sup>1</sup> He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave.

The picture is not barren of instruction to actual men. The Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin. But that Power which strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences, dooms to a slow and poisonous decay those meaner spirits that dare



to abjure its dominion. Their destiny is more abject and inglorious as their delinquency is more contemptible and pernicious. They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief; these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse. They languish, because none feel with them their common nature. They are morally dead. They are neither friends, nor lovers, nor fathers, nor citizens of the world, nor benefactors of their country. Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. All else, selfish, blind, and torpid, are those unforeseeing multitudes who constitute, together with their own, the lasting misery and loneliness of the world. Those who love not their fellow-beings live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave.

"The good die first,  
And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust,  
Burn to the socket!"<sup>2</sup>

December 14, 1815

***Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude***

*Nondum amabam, et amare amabam, quærebam  
quid amarem, amans amare.—Confess. St. August.*<sup>3</sup>

Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!  
If our great Mother<sup>4</sup> has imbued my soul  
With aught of natural piety<sup>5</sup> to feel  
Your love, and recompense the boon<sup>o</sup> with mine;<sup>6</sup>

5 If dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even,<sup>o</sup>  
With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,<sup>z</sup>  
And solemn midnight's tingling silentness;  
If autumn's hollow sighs in the sere wood,  
And winter robing with pure snow and crowns  
Of starry ice the grey grass and bare boughs;  
10 If spring's voluptuous pantings when she breathes  
Her first sweet kisses, have been dear to me;  
If no bright bird, insect, or gentle beast  
I consciously have injured, but still loved  
And cherished these my kindred; then forgive  
15 This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw  
No portion of your wanted<sup>o</sup> favour now!

Mother of this unfathomable world!  
Favour my solemn song, for I have loved  
Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched  
20 Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,  
And my heart ever gazes on the depth  
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed  
In charnels and on coffins, where black death  
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,  
25 Hoping to still these obstinate questionings<sup>8</sup>  
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,  
Thy messenger, to render up the tale  
Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,  
When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,  
30 Like an inspired and desperate alchymist  
Staking his very life on some dark hope,  
Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks  
With my most innocent love, until strange tears  
Uniting with those breathless kisses, made  
35 Such magic as compels the charmed night  
To render up thy charge: . . . and, though ne'er yet  
Thou hast unveil'd thy inmost sanctuary,

Enough from incommunicable dream,  
And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,  
40 Has shone within me, that serenely now  
And moveless,<sup>o</sup> as a long-forgotten lyre  
Suspended in the solitary dome  
Of some mysterious and deserted fane,<sup>o</sup>  
I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain  
45 May modulate with murmurs of the air,<sup>9</sup>  
And motions of the forests and the sea,  
And voice of living beings, and woven hymns  
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man.<sup>1</sup>

50 There was a Poet whose untimely tomb  
No human hands with pious reverence reared,  
But the charmed eddies of autumnal winds  
Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid  
Of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness:—  
A lovely youth,—no mourning maiden decked  
55 With weeping flowers, or votive cypress<sup>2</sup> wreath,  
The lone couch of his everlasting sleep:—  
Gentle, and brave, and generous,—no lorn<sup>o</sup> bard  
Breathed o'er his dark fate one melodious sigh:  
He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude.  
60 Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,  
And virgins, as unknown he past, have pined  
And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes.  
The fire of those soft orbs has ceased to burn,  
And Silence, too enamoured of that voice,  
65 Locks its mute music in her rugged cell.

By solemn vision, and bright silver dream,  
His infancy was nurtured. Every sight  
And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,  
Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.  
70 The fountains of divine philosophy  
Fled not his thirsting lips, and all of great

Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past  
In truth or fable consecrates, he felt  
And knew. When early youth had past, he left  
75 His cold fireside and alienated home  
To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands.  
Many a wide waste and tangled wilderness  
Has lured his fearless steps; and he has bought  
With his sweet voice and eyes, from savage men,  
80 His rest and food. Nature's most secret steps  
He like her shadow has pursued, where'er  
The red volcano overcanopies  
Its fields of snow and pinnacles of ice  
With burning smoke, or where bitumen lakes<sup>3</sup>  
85 On black bare pointed islets ever beat  
With sluggish surge, or where the secret caves  
Rugged and dark, winding among the springs  
Of fire and poison, inaccessible  
To avarice or pride, their starry domes  
90 Of diamond and of gold expand above  
Numberless and immeasurable halls,  
Frequent<sup>o</sup> with crystal column, and clear shrines  
Of pearl, and thrones radiant with chrysolite.<sup>4</sup>  
Nor had that scene of ampler majesty  
95 Than gems or gold, the varying roof of heaven  
And the green earth lost in his heart its claims  
To love and wonder; he would linger long  
In lonesome vales, making the wild his home,  
Until the doves and squirrels would partake  
100 From his innocuous hand his bloodless food,<sup>5</sup>  
Lured by the gentle meaning of his looks,  
And the wild antelope, that starts whene'er  
The dry leaf rustles in the brake,<sup>o</sup> suspend  
Her timid steps to gaze upon a form  
105 More graceful than her own.

His wandering step  
Obedient to high thoughts, has visited  
The awful<sup>o</sup> ruins of the days of old:  
Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec,<sup>6</sup> and the waste  
Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers  
110 Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,  
Memphis and Thebes,<sup>7</sup> and whatsoe'er of strange  
Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,  
Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphynx,  
Dark Æthiopia in her desert hills  
115 Conceals. Among the ruined temples there,  
Stupendous columns, and wild images  
Of more than man, where marble daemons<sup>8</sup> watch  
The Zodiac's<sup>9</sup> brazen mystery, and dead men  
Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls  
120 around,<sup>1</sup>  
He lingered, poring on memorials  
Of the world's youth, through the long burning day  
Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the  
moon  
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades  
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed  
125 And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind  
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw  
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

Meanwhile an Arab maiden brought his food,  
Her daily portion, from her father's tent,  
130 And spread her matting for his couch, and stole  
From duties and repose to tend his steps:—  
Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe  
To speak her love:—and watched his nightly sleep,  
Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips  
135 Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath

Of innocent dreams arose: then, when red morn  
Made paler the pale moon, to her cold home  
Wildered,<sup>o</sup> and wan, and panting, she returned.

140       The Poet wandering on, through Arabie  
And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,<sup>2</sup>  
And o'er the aërial mountains which pour down  
Indus and Oxus<sup>3</sup> from their icy caves,  
In joy and exultation held his way;  
145       Till in the vale of Cashmire,<sup>4</sup> far within  
Its loneliest dell, where odorous plants entwine  
Beneath the hollow rocks a natural bower,  
Beside a sparkling rivulet he stretched  
His languid limbs. A vision on his sleep  
150       There came, a dream of hopes that never yet  
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid  
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.  
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,  
Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held  
155       His inmost sense suspended in its web  
Of many-coloured woof<sup>o</sup> and shifting hues.  
Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,  
And lofty hopes of divine liberty,  
Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,  
160       Herself a poet. Soon the solemn mood  
Of her pure mind kindled through all her frame  
A permeating fire: wild numbers<sup>o</sup> then  
She raised, with voice stifled in tremulous sobs  
Subdued by its own pathos: her fair hands  
165       Were bare alone, sweeping from some strange harp  
Strange symphony, and in their branching veins  
The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale.  
The beating of her heart was heard to fill  
The pauses of her music, and her breath

170 Tumultuously accorded with those fits  
Of intermitted song. Sudden she rose,  
As if her heart impatiently endured  
Its bursting burthen: at the sound he turned,  
And saw by the warm light of their own life  
175 Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil  
Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,  
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,  
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips  
Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.  
180 His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess  
Of love. He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled  
His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet  
Her panting bosom: . . . she drew back a while,  
Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,  
185 With frantic gesture and short breathless cry  
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.  
Now blackness veiled his dizzy eyes, and night  
Involved<sup>o</sup> and swallowed up the vision; sleep,  
Like a dark flood suspended in its course,  
190 Rolled back its impulse on his vacant brain.

Roused by the shock he started from his trance—  
The cold white light of morning, the blue moon  
Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,  
The distinct valley and the vacant woods,  
195 Spread round him where he stood. Whither have fled  
The hues of heaven that canopied his bower  
Of yesternight? The sounds that soothed his sleep,  
The mystery and the majesty of Earth,  
The joy, the exultation? His wan eyes  
200 Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly  
As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven.  
The spirit of sweet human love has sent  
A vision to the sleep of him who spurned  
Her choicest gifts. He eagerly pursues

205 Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade;  
He overleaps the bounds. Alas! alas!  
Were limbs, and breath, and being intertwined  
Thus treacherously? Lost, lost, for ever lost,  
210 In the wide pathless desert of dim sleep,  
That beautiful shape! Does the dark gate of death  
Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,  
O Sleep?<sup>5</sup> Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds,  
And pendent<sup>o</sup> mountains seen in the calm lake,  
215 Lead only to a black and watery depth,  
While death's blue vault, with loathliest vapours  
hung,  
Where every shade which the foul grave exhales  
Hides its dead eye from the detested day,  
Conduct, O Sleep, to thy delightful realms?  
220 This doubt with sudden tide flowed on his heart,  
The insatiate hope which it awakened, stung  
His brain even like despair.

While day-light held  
The sky, the Poet kept mute conference  
With his still soul. At night the passion came,  
225 Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream,  
And shook him from his rest, and led him forth  
Into the darkness.—As an eagle grasped  
In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast  
Burn with the poison, and precipitates<sup>o</sup>  
230 Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and  
cloud,  
Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight  
O'er the wide aëry wilderness:<sup>6</sup> thus driven  
By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,  
Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,  
235 Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,  
Startling with careless step the moon-light snake,  
He fled. Red morning dawned upon his flight,



Shedding the mockery of its vital hues  
Upon his cheek of death. He wandered on  
Till vast Aornos seen from Petra's steep<sup>7</sup>  
240 Hung o'er the low horizon like a cloud;  
Through Balk,<sup>8</sup> and where the desolated tombs  
Of Parthian kings<sup>9</sup> scatter to every wind  
Their wasting dust, wildly he wandered on,  
Day after day, a weary waste of hours,  
245 Bearing within his life the brooding care  
That ever fed on its decaying flame.  
And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair  
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering  
Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand  
250 Hung like dead bone within its withered skin;  
Life, and the lustre that consumed it, shone  
As in a furnace burning secretly  
From his dark eyes alone. The cottagers,  
Who ministered with human charity  
255 His human wants, beheld with wondering awe  
Their fleeting visitant. The mountaineer,  
Encountering on some dizzy precipice  
That spectral form, deemed that the Spirit of wind  
With lightning eyes, and eager breath, and feet  
260 Disturbing not the drifted snow, had paused  
In its career: the infant would conceal  
His troubled visage in his mother's robe  
In terror at the glare of those wild eyes,  
To remember their strange light in many a dream  
265 Of after-times; but youthful maidens, taught  
By nature, would interpret half the woe  
That wasted him, would call him with false<sup>0</sup> names  
Brother, and friend, would press his pallid hand  
At parting, and watch, dim through tears, the path  
270 Of his departure from their father's door.

At length upon the lone Chorasmian shore<sup>1</sup>  
He paused, a wide and melancholy waste  
Of putrid marshes. A strong impulse urged  
His steps to the sea-shore. A swan was there,  
275 Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds.  
It rose as he approached, and with strong wings  
Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course  
High over the immeasurable main.  
His eyes pursued its flight.—"Thou hast a home,  
280 Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,  
Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck  
With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes  
Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy.  
And what am I that I should linger here,  
285 With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,  
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned  
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers  
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven  
That echoes not my thoughts?" A gloomy smile  
290 Of desperate hope convulsed his curling lips  
For sleep, he knew, kept most relentlessly  
Its precious charge,<sup>2</sup> and silent death exposed,  
Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,  
With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms.  
295

Startled by his own thoughts he looked around.  
There was no fair fiend<sup>3</sup> near him, not a sight  
Or sound of awe but in his own deep mind.  
A little shallop<sup>o</sup> floating near the shore  
Caught the impatient wandering of his gaze.  
300 It had been long abandoned, for its sides  
Gaped wide with many a rift, and its frail joints  
Swayed with the undulations of the tide.  
A restless impulse urged him to embark  
And meet lone Death on the drear ocean's waste;

305 For well he knew that mighty Shadow loves  
The slimy caverns of the populous deep.

The day was fair and sunny; sea and sky  
Drank its inspiring radiance, and the wind  
310 Swept strongly from the shore, blackening the  
waves.

Following his eager soul, the wanderer  
Leaped in the boat, he spread his cloak aloft  
On the bare mast, and took his lonely seat,  
And felt the boat speed o'er the tranquil sea  
315 Like a torn cloud before the hurricane.<sup>4</sup>

As one that in a silver vision floats  
Obedient to the sweep of odorous winds  
Upon resplendent clouds, so rapidly  
Along the dark and ruffled waters fled  
The straining boat.—A whirlwind swept it on,  
320 With fierce gusts and precipitating force,  
Through the white ridges of the chafed sea.  
The waves arose. Higher and higher still  
Their fierce necks writhed beneath the tempest's  
scourge

Like serpents struggling in a vulture's grasp.  
325 Calm and rejoicing in the fearful war  
Of wave ruining<sup>o</sup> on wave, and blast on blast  
Descending, and black flood on whirlpool driven  
With dark obliterating course, he sate:

As if their genii were the ministers  
330 Appointed to conduct him to the light  
Of those beloved eyes, the Poet sate  
Holding the steady helm. Evening came on,  
The beams of sunset hung their rainbow hues  
High 'mid the shifting domes of sheeted spray  
335 That canopied his path o'er the waste deep;  
Twilight, ascending slowly from the east,

Entwin'd in duskier wreaths her braided locks  
O'er the fair front and radiant eyes of day;  
Night followed, clad with stars. On every side  
340 More horribly the multitudinous streams  
Of ocean's mountainous waste to mutual war  
Rushed in dark tumult thundering, as to mock  
The calm and spangled sky. The little boat  
Still fled before the storm; still fled, like foam  
345 Down the steep cataract of a wintry river;  
Now pausing on the edge of the riven<sup>o</sup> wave;  
Now leaving far behind the bursting mass  
That fell, convulsing ocean. Safely fled—  
As if that frail and wasted human form,  
350 Had been an elemental god.<sup>5</sup>

At midnight

The moon arose: and lo! the etherial cliffs<sup>6</sup>  
Of Caucasus, whose icy summits shone  
Among the stars like sunlight, and around  
Whose cavern'd base the whirlpools and the waves  
355 Bursting and eddying irresistibly  
Rage and resound for ever.—Who shall save?—  
The boat fled on,—the boiling torrent drove,—  
The crags closed round with black and jagged arms,  
The shattered mountain overhung the sea,  
360 And faster still, beyond all human speed,  
Suspended on the sweep of the smooth wave,  
The little boat was driven. A cavern there  
Yawned, and amid its slant and winding depths  
Ingulphed the rushing sea. The boat fled on  
365 With unrelaxing speed.—“Vision and Love!”  
The Poet cried aloud, “I have beheld  
The path of thy departure. Sleep and death  
Shall not divide us long!”

The boat pursued

370 The winding of the cavern. Day-light shone  
At length upon that gloomy river's flow;  
Now, where the fiercest war among the waves  
Is calm, on the unfathomable stream  
The boat moved slowly. Where the mountain, riven,  
Exposed those black depths to the azure sky,  
375 Ere yet the flood's enormous volume fell  
Even to the base of Caucasus, with sound  
That shook the everlasting rocks, the mass  
Filled with one whirlpool all that ample chasm;  
Stair above stair the eddying waters rose,  
380 Circling immeasurably fast, and laved<sup>o</sup>  
With alternating dash the knarled roots  
Of mighty trees, that stretched their giant arms  
In darkness over it. I' the midst was left,  
Reflecting, yet distorting every cloud,  
385 A pool of treacherous and tremendous calm.  
Seized by the sway of the ascending stream,  
With dizzy swiftness, round, and round, and round,  
Ridge after ridge the straining boat arose,  
Till on the verge of the extremest curve,  
390 Where, through an opening of the rocky bank,  
The waters overflow, and a smooth spot  
Of glassy quiet mid those battling tides  
Is left, the boat paused shuddering.—Shall it sink  
Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress  
395 Of that resistless gulph embosom it?  
Now shall it fall?—A wandering stream of wind,  
Breathed from the west, has caught the expanded  
sail,  
And, lo! with gentle motion, between banks  
Of mossy slope, and on a placid stream,  
400 Beneath a woven grove it sails, and, hark!  
The ghastly torrent mingles its far roar,  
With the breeze murmuring in the musical woods.  
Where the embowering trees recede, and leave

405 A little space of green expanse, the cove  
Is closed by meeting banks, whose yellow flowers  
For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,  
Reflected in the crystal calm. The wave  
Of the boat's motion marred their pensive task,  
410 Which nought but vagrant bird, or wanton wind,  
Or falling spear-grass, or their own decay  
Had e'er disturbed before. The Poet longed  
To deck with their bright hues his withered hair,  
But on his heart its solitude returned,  
415 And he forbore.<sup>7</sup> Not the strong impulse hid  
In those flushed cheeks, bent eyes, and shadowy  
frame,  
Had yet performed its ministry: it hung  
Upon his life, as lightning in a cloud  
Gleams, hovering ere it vanish, ere the floods  
Of night close over it.

The noonday sun

420 Now shone upon the forest, one vast mass  
Of mingling shade, whose brown magnificence  
A narrow vale embosoms. There, huge caves,  
Scooped in the dark base of their aëry rocks  
Mocking<sup>8</sup> its moans, respond and roar for ever.  
425 The meeting boughs and implicated<sup>9</sup> leaves  
Wove twilight o'er the Poet's path, as led  
By love, or dream, or god, or mightier Death,  
He sought in Nature's dearest haunt, some bank,  
Her cradle, and his sepulchre. More dark  
430 And dark the shades accumulate. The oak,  
Expanding its immense and knotty arms,  
Embraces the light beech. The pyramids  
Of the tall cedar overarching, frame  
Most solemn domes within, and far below.  
435 Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,  
The ash and the acacia floating hang

Tremulous and pale. Like restless serpents, clothed  
In rainbow and in fire, the parasites,  
Starred with ten thousand blossoms, flow around  
440 The grey trunks, and, as gamesome infants' eyes,  
With gentle meanings, and most innocent wiles,  
Fold their beams round the hearts of those that love,  
These twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs  
Uniting their close union; the woven leaves  
445 Make net-work of the dark blue light of day,  
And the night's noontide clearness, mutable  
As shapes in the weird clouds. Soft mossy lawns  
Beneath these canopies extend their swells,  
Fragrant with perfumed herbs, and eyed with blooms  
450 Minute yet beautiful. One darkest glen  
Sends from its woods of musk-rose, twined with  
jasmine,  
A soul-dissolving odour, to invite  
To some more lovely mystery. Through the dell,  
Silence and Twilight here, twin-sisters, keep  
455 Their noonday watch, and sail among the shades,  
Like vaporous shapes half seen; beyond, a well,  
Dark, gleaming, and of most translucent wave,  
Images all the woven boughs above,  
And each depending leaf, and every speck  
460 Of azure sky, darting between their chasms;  
Nor aught else in the liquid mirror laves  
Its portraiture, but some inconstant star  
Between one foliated lattice twinkling fair,  
Or, painted bird, sleeping beneath the moon,  
465 Or gorgeous insect floating motionless,  
Unconscious of the day, ere yet his wings  
Have spread their glories to the gaze of noon.

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld  
Their own wan light through the reflected lines  
Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth

470 Of that still fountain; as the human heart,  
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,  
Sees its own treacherous likeness there. He heard  
475 The motion of the leaves, the grass that sprung  
Startled and glanced and trembled even to feel  
An unaccustomed presence, and the sound  
Of the sweet brook that from the secret springs  
Of that dark fountain rose. A Spirit seemed  
480 To stand beside him—clothed in no bright robes  
Of shadowy silver or enshrining light,  
Borrowed from aught the visible world affords  
Of grace, or majesty, or mystery;—  
But, undulating woods, and silent well,  
And leaping rivulet, and evening gloom  
485 Now deepening the dark shades, for speech  
assuming  
Held commune with him, as if he and it  
Were all that was,—only . . . when his regard  
Was raised by intense pensiveness, . . . two eyes,  
490 Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought,  
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles  
To beckon him.

Obedient to the light  
That shone within his soul, he went, pursuing  
The windings of the dell.—The rivulet  
495 Wanton and wild, through many a green ravine  
Beneath the forest flowed. Sometimes it fell  
Among the moss with hollow harmony  
Dark and profound. Now on the polished stones  
It danced; like childhood laughing as it went:  
Then, through the plain in tranquil wanderings crept,  
500 Reflecting every herb and drooping bud  
That overhung its quietness.—“O stream!  
Whose source is inaccessibly profound,  
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?



505 Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,  
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulphs,  
Thy searchless<sup>o</sup> fountain, and invisible course  
Have each their type in me: and the wide sky,  
And measureless ocean may declare as soon  
510 What oozy cavern or what wandering cloud  
Contains thy waters, as the universe  
Tell where these living thoughts reside, when  
stretched  
Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste  
I' the passing wind!"

Beside the grassy shore  
Of the small stream he went; he did impress  
515 On the green moss his tremulous step, that caught  
Strong shuddering from his burning limbs. As one  
Roused by some joyous madness from the couch  
Of fever, he did move; yet, not like him,  
Forgetful of the grave, where, when the flame  
520 Of his frail exultation shall be spent,  
He must descend. With rapid steps he went  
Beneath the shade of trees, beside the flow  
Of the wild babbling rivulet; and now  
The forest's solemn canopies were changed  
525 For the uniform and lightsome<sup>o</sup> evening sky.  
Grey rocks did peep from the spare moss, and  
stemmed  
The struggling brook: tall spires of windlestrae<sup>9</sup>  
Threw their thin shadows down the rugged slope,  
And nought but knarled roots<sup>1</sup> of antient pines  
530 Branchless and blasted, clenched with grasping roots  
The unwilling soil. A gradual change was here,  
Yet ghastly. For, as fast years flow away,  
The smooth brow gathers, and the hair grows thin  
And white, and where irradiate<sup>o</sup> dewy eyes

535 Had shone, gleam stony orbs:—so from his steps  
Bright flowers departed, and the beautiful shade  
Of the green groves, with all their odorous winds  
And musical motions. Calm, he still pursued  
540 The stream, that with a larger volume now  
Rolled through the labyrinthine dell; and there  
Fretted a path through its descending curves  
With its wintry speed. On every side now rose  
Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,  
545 Lifted their black and barren pinnacles  
In the light of evening, and its precipice<sup>2</sup>  
Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above,  
Mid toppling stones, black gulphs and yawning  
caves,  
Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues  
To the loud stream. Lo! where the pass expands  
550 Its stony jaws, the abrupt mountain breaks,  
And seems, with its accumulated crags,  
To overhang the world: for wide expand  
Beneath the wan stars and descending moon  
Islanded seas, blue mountains, mighty streams,  
555 Dim tracts and vast, robed in the lustrous gloom  
Of leaden-coloured even, and fiery hills  
Mingling their flames with twilight, on the verge  
Of the remote horizon. The near<sup>o</sup> scene,  
In naked and severe simplicity,  
560 Made contrast with the universe. A pine,<sup>3</sup>  
Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy  
Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast  
Yielding one only response, at each pause  
In most familiar cadence, with the howl  
565 The thunder and the hiss of homeless streams  
Mingling its solemn song, whilst the broad river,  
Foaming and hurrying o'er its rugged path,  
Fell into that immeasurable void

570       Scattering its waters to the passing winds.

      Yet the grey precipice and solemn pine  
      And torrent, were not all;—one silent nook  
      Was there. Even on the edge of that vast mountain,  
      Upheld by knotty roots and fallen rocks,  
      It overlooked in its serenity  
575       The dark earth, and the bending vault of stars.  
      It was a tranquil spot, that seemed to smile  
      Even in the lap of horror. Ivy clasped  
      The fissured stones with its entwining arms,  
      And did embower with leaves for ever green,  
580       And berries dark, the smooth and even space  
      Of its inviolated floor, and here  
      The children of the autumnal whirlwind bore,  
      In wanton sport, those bright leaves, whose decay,  
      Red, yellow, or ethereally pale,  
585       Rivals the pride of summer. 'Tis the haunt  
      Of every gentle wind, whose breath can teach  
      The wilds to love tranquillity. One step,  
      One human step alone, has ever broken  
      The stillness of its solitude:—one voice  
590       Alone inspired its echoes,—even that voice  
      Which hither came, floating among the winds,  
      And led the loveliest among human forms  
      To make their wild haunts the depository  
      Of all the grace and beauty that endued  
595       Its motions, render up its majesty,  
      Scatter its music on the unfeeling storm,  
      And to the damp leaves and blue cavern mould,  
      Nurses of rainbow flowers and branching moss,  
      Commit the colours of that varying cheek,  
600       That snowy breast, those dark and drooping eyes.

      The dim and horned<sup>4</sup> moon hung low, and poured  
      A sea of lustre on the horizon's verge

That overflowed its mountains. Yellow mist  
Filled the unbounded atmosphere, and drank  
605 Wan moonlight even to fulness: not a star  
Shone, not a sound was heard; the very winds,  
Danger's grim playmates, on that precipice  
Slept, clasped in his embrace.—O, storm of death!  
Whose sightless<sup>5</sup> speed divides this sullen night:  
610 And thou, colossal Skeleton,<sup>o</sup> that, still  
Guiding its irresistible career  
In thy devastating omnipotence,  
Art king of this frail world, from the red field  
Of slaughter, from the reeking hospital,  
615 The patriot's sacred couch, the snowy bed  
Of innocence, the scaffold and the throne,  
A mighty voice invokes thee. Ruin calls  
His brother Death. A rare and regal prey  
He hath prepared, prowling around the world;  
620 Glutted with which thou mayst repose, and men  
Go to their graves like flowers or creeping worms,  
Nor ever more offer at thy dark shrine  
The unheeded tribute of a broken heart.

When on the threshold of the green recess  
625 The wanderer's footsteps fell, he knew that death  
Was on him. Yet a little, ere it fled,  
Did he resign his high and holy soul  
To images of the majestic past,  
That paused within his passive being now,  
630 Like winds that bear sweet music, when they  
breathe  
Through some dim latticed chamber. He did place  
His pale lean hand upon the rugged trunk  
Of the old pine. Upon an ivied stone  
Reclined his languid head, his limbs did rest,  
635 Diffused and motionless, on the smooth brink  
Of that obscurest<sup>o</sup> chasm;—and thus he lay,

Surrendering to their final impulses  
The hovering powers of life. Hope and despair,  
The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear  
640 Marred his repose, the influxes of sense,  
And his own being unalloyed by pain,  
Yet feebler and more feeble, calmly fed  
The stream of thought, till he lay breathing there  
At peace, and faintly smiling:—his last sight  
645 Was the great moon, which o'er the western line  
Of the wide world her mighty horn suspended,  
With whose dun<sup>o</sup> beams inwoven darkness seemed  
To mingle. Now upon the jagged hills  
It rests, and still as the divided frame  
650 Of the vast meteor<sup>6</sup> sunk, the Poet's blood,  
That ever beat in mystic sympathy  
With nature's ebb and flow, grew feebler still:  
And when two lessening points of light alone  
Gleamed through the darkness, the alternate gasp  
655 Of his faint respiration scarce did stir  
The stagnate night:<sup>7</sup>—till the minutest ray  
Was quenched, the pulse yet lingered in his heart.  
It paused—it fluttered. But when heaven remained  
Utterly black, the murky shades involved  
660 An image, silent, cold, and motionless,  
As their own voiceless earth and vacant air.  
Even as a vapour<sup>o</sup> fed with golden beams  
That ministered on<sup>8</sup> sunlight, ere the west  
Eclipses it, was now that wonderous frame—  
665 No sense, no motion, no divinity—  
A fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings  
The breath of heaven did wander—a bright stream  
Once fed with many-voiced waves—a dream  
Of youth, which night and time have quenched for  
670 ever,  
Still, dark, and dry, and unremembered now.

O, for Medea's wondrous alchemy,  
Which wheresoe'er it fell made the earth gleam  
With bright flowers, and the wintry boughs exhale  
From vernal blooms fresh fragrance!<sup>9</sup> O, that God,  
675 Profuse of poisons, would concede the chalice  
Which but one living man<sup>1</sup> has drained, who now,  
Vessel of deathless wrath, a slave that feels  
No proud exemption in the blighting curse  
He bears, over the world wanders for ever,  
680 Lone as incarnate death! O, that the dream  
Of dark magician in his visioned cave,<sup>2</sup>  
Raking the cinders of a crucible  
For life and power, even when his feeble hand  
Shakes in its last decay, were the true law  
685 Of this so lovely world! But thou art fled  
Like some frail exhalation;<sup>o</sup> which the dawn  
Robes in its golden beams,—ah! thou hast fled!  
The brave, the gentle, and the beautiful,  
The child of grace and genius. Heartless things  
690 Are done and said i' the world, and many worms  
And beasts and men live on, and mighty Earth  
From sea and mountain, city and wilderness,  
In vesper<sup>3</sup> low or joyous orison,<sup>o</sup>  
Lifts still its solemn voice:—but thou art fled—  
695 Thou canst no longer know or love the shapes  
Of this phantasmal scene, who have to thee  
Been purest ministers, who are, alas!  
Now thou art not. Upon those pallid lips  
So sweet even in their silence, on those eyes  
700 That image sleep in death, upon that form  
Yet safe from the worm's outrage, let no tear  
Be shed—not even in thought. Nor, when those hues  
Are gone, and those divinest lineaments,  
Worn by the senseless<sup>o</sup> wind, shall live alone

705 In the frail pauses of this simple strain,  
 Let not high verse, mourning the memory  
 Of that which is no more, or painting's woe  
 Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery  
 710 Their own cold powers. Art and eloquence,  
 And all the shews o' the world are frail and vain  
 To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.  
 It is a woe too "deep for tears,"<sup>4</sup> when all  
 Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,  
 Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves  
 715 Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,  
 The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;  
 But pale despair and cold tranquillity,  
 Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,  
 Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.  
 720

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## Endnotes

- Note 1: For Shelley's expansion of this account of love as an idealized projection of all that is best in the self, see his essay "On Love," p. 787, below. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wordsworth's *The Excursion* 1.519–21; the passage occurs also in *The Ruined Cottage* 96–98, which Wordsworth reworked into the first book of *The Excursion* (1814). [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: St. Augustine's *Confessions* 3.1: "Not yet did I love, though I loved to love, seeking what I might love, loving to love." Augustine thus describes his state of mind when he was addicted to illicit sexual love; the true object of his desire, which compels the tortuous spiritual journey of his life, he later discovered to be the infinite and transcendent God. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Nature, invoked as common mother to both the elements and the poet. [Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Wordsworth, "My heart leaps up," lines 8–9: "And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety." Wordsworth also used these lines as the epigraph to his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, with my love.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The sunset colors.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," lines 141–42: "those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The narrator calls on the Mother, his natural muse, to make him her wind harp.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Compare Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," lines 94ff.: "A presence . . . / Whose dwelling is . . . the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man: / A motion and a spirit."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The cypress represented mourning. "Votive": offered to fulfill a vow to the gods.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Lakes of pitch, flowing from a volcano.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: An olive-green semiprecious stone.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Shelley was himself a vegetarian.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An ancient city in what is now Lebanon. Tyre was once an important commercial city on the Phoenician coast.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The ancient capital of Upper Egypt. Memphis is the ruined capital of Lower Egypt.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In Greek mythology, not evil spirits but minor deities or attendant spirits.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In the temple of Isis at Denderah, Egypt, the Zodiac is represented on the ceiling. Journeying among the great civilizations of the past has taken the Poet backward in time to older and older cultures—from the Greeks to the Phoenicians, the Jews, the Babylonians, and the Egyptians. Finally he reaches Ethiopia (line 115), which had been described as the "cradle of the sciences."[Return to reference 9](#)



- Note 1: That is, by quotations inscribed in the stone.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A desert in southern Persia.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Rivers in Asia.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Now known as Kashmir, an Indian state bordered on the northeast by the Himalayas. In this choice of setting, Shelley was influenced by *The Missionary*, the 1811 novel by Sydney Owenson. See "The Romantic Imagination and the 'Oriental Nations' " on p. 931, below.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, is death the only access to this maiden of his dream?[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The eagle and serpent locked in mortal combat is a recurrent image in Shelley's poems (see *Prometheus Unbound* 3.1.72–73).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A mountain stronghold in the northern part of ancient Arabia. Aornos is a high mountain. "Petra": the rock (literal trans.).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Bactria, in ancient Persia, is now part of Afghanistan.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The Parthians inhabited northern Persia.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The shore of Lake Aral, about 175 miles east of the Caspian Sea.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, the maiden in the sleeper's dream.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Apparently he suspects there may have been an external agent luring him to the death described in the preceding lines.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: If the Poet's boat is being carried upstream on the Oxus River from the Aral Sea to the river's headwaters in the Hindu Kush Mountains (the "Indian Caucasus" that is the setting for *Prometheus Unbound*), then the journey is taking him to a region that the naturalist Buffon (whom Shelley often read) had identified as the cradle of the human race. But it is also possible that the starting point for this journey is the Caspian Sea, in

which case the journey would end near the traditional site of the Garden of Eden.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: A god of one of the natural elements (see line 1).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, cliffs high in the air.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The “yellow flowers” overhanging their own reflection (lines 406–8), probably narcissus, may signify the narcissistic temptation of the Poet to be satisfied with a projection of his own self. But his need for an unearthly Other revives, and “the strong impulse” (line 415) drives him on.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: As often in Shelley, “mocking” has a double sense: mimicking as well as ridiculing the sounds of the forest (line 421).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Windlestraw (Scottish dial.); tall, dried stalks of grass.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Probably an error for “stumps” or “trunks.”[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Headlong fall (of the stream, line 540).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Pine trees in Shelley often signify persistence and steadfastness amid change and vicissitudes.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The moon is crescent shaped with the points rising, as in Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode”: “the new Moon / With the old Moon in her arms.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Invisible, or perhaps “unseeing.”[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, the moon. The word *meteor* was once used for any phenomenon in the skies, as our modern term *meteorology* suggests.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The ebbing of the Poet’s life parallels the descent of the “horned moon,” to the moment when only the two “points of light”—its horns—show above the hills.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Attended, acted as a servant to.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Medea brewed a magic potion to rejuvenate the dying Aeson; where some of the potion spilled on the ground, flowers sprang up (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.275ff.).[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: The Wandering Jew. According to a medieval legend, he had taunted Christ on the way to the crucifixion and was condemned to wander the world, deathless, until Christ's second coming. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Cave in which he has visions. "Dark magician": an alchemist attempting to produce the elixir of enduring life. Alchemy intrigued both Shelleys. See Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" (p. 1026, below). [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Evening prayer. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: From the last line of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." [Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *gift* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *evening* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *customary* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *motionless* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *temple* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *abandoned* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *crowded* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thicket* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *awe-inspiring* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bewildered* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *weave* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *verse* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wrapped up* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *phantom* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *jutting, overhanging* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hastens* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mistaken* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *small open boat* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *crashing* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *torn asunder* [Return to reference °](#)

- °: *washed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *intertwined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *undiscoverable*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *luminous*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *illumined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nearby*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *death*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *darkest*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *darkened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cloud*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mist*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *prayer*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unfeeling*[Return to reference](#) °

# Mont Blanc<sup>1</sup>

## *Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni*

### 1

5 The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters,—with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap forever,  
10 Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

### 2

15 Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—  
Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale,  
Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail  
Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams: awful<sup>o</sup> scene,  
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down  
From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne,  
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame  
Of lightning through the tempest;—thou dost lie,  
Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,  
20 Children of elder<sup>o</sup> time, in whose devotion  
The chainless winds still come and ever came  
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging

To hear—an old and solemn harmony;  
Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep  
25 Of the etherial waterfall, whose veil  
Robes some unsculptured<sup>2</sup> image; the strange sleep  
Which when the voices of the desert fail  
Wraps all in its own deep eternity;—  
Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,  
30 A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;  
Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,  
Thou art the path of that unresting sound—  
Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee  
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
35 To muse on my own separate phantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around;  
40 One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings  
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest  
Where that<sup>o</sup> or thou<sup>o</sup> art no unbidden guest,  
In the still cave of the witch Poesy,<sup>3</sup>  
Seeking among the shadows that pass by  
45 Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,  
Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast  
From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!<sup>4</sup>

### 3

Some say that gleams of a remoter world  
Visit the soul in sleep,—that death is slumber,  
50 And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber  
Of those who wake and live.—I look on high;  
Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled  
The veil of life and death? or do I lie  
In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep

55 Spread far around and inaccessibly  
Its circles? For the very spirit fails,  
Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep  
That vanishes among the viewless<sup>o</sup> gales!  
Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,  
60 Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—  
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms  
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between  
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,  
Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread  
65 And wind among the accumulated steeps;  
A desert peopled by the storms alone,  
Save<sup>o</sup> when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,  
And the wolf tracts<sup>o</sup> her there—how hideously  
Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,  
70 Ghastly, and scarred, and riven.<sup>o</sup>—Is this the scene  
Where the old Earthquake-dæmon<sup>5</sup> taught her  
young  
Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea  
Of fire, envelope once this silent snow?  
None can reply—all seems eternal now.  
75 The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
Which teaches awful doubt,<sup>6</sup> or faith so mild,  
So solemn, so serene, that man may be  
But for such faith<sup>7</sup> with nature reconciled;  
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
80 Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which<sup>8</sup> the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

#### 4

85 The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,  
Ocean, and all the living things that dwell  
Within the dædal<sup>9</sup> earth; lightning, and rain,

Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,  
The torpor of the year when feeble dreams  
Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep  
Holds every future leaf and flower;—the bound  
90 With which from that detested trance they leap;  
The works and ways of man, their death and birth,  
And that of him and all that his may be;  
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.  
95 Power dwells apart in its tranquillity  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:  
And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,  
On which I gaze, even these primæval mountains  
Teach the advert<sup>o</sup>ing mind. The glaciers creep  
100 Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far  
fountains,  
Slow rolling on; there, many a precipice,  
Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power  
Have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,  
A city of death, distinct with many a tower  
105 And wall impregnable of beaming ice.  
Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin  
Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky  
Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewing  
Its destined path, or in the mangled soil  
110 Branchless and shattered stand: the rocks, drawn  
down  
From yon remotest waste, have overthrown  
The limits of the dead and living world,  
Never to be reclaimed. The dwelling-place  
Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;  
115 Their food and their retreat for ever gone,  
So much of life and joy is lost. The race  
Of man, flies far in dread; his work and dwelling  
Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,  
And their place is not known. Below, vast caves



120 Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,  
Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling<sup>1</sup>  
Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,<sup>2</sup>  
The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever  
125 Rolls its loud waters to the ocean waves,  
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

## 5

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:—the power is there,  
The still and solemn power of many sights,  
And many sounds, and much of life and death.  
130 In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,  
In the lone glare of day, the snows descend  
Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,  
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,  
Or the star-beams dart through them:—Winds  
contend  
135 Silently there, and heap the snow with breath  
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home  
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes  
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods  
Over the snow. The secret strength of things  
140 Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!  
And what were thou,<sup>3</sup> and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

1816

## Endnotes

1817

- Note 1:  
This poem, in which Shelley both echoes and argues with the poetry of natural description written by Wordsworth and Coleridge, was first published as the conclusion to the *History of*

*a Six Weeks' Tour*. This was a book that Percy and Mary Shelley wrote together detailing the excursion that they and Claire Clairmont took in July 1816 to the valley of Chamonix, in what now southeastern France. That valley lies at the foot of Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps and in all Europe.

In the *History* Percy Shelley commented on his poem: "It was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects it attempts to describe

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: That is, not formed by humans.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, in the part of the mind that creates poetry.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In these difficult lines (41–48) Shelley seems to be recalling Plato's allegory in the *Republic* of the mind as cave. Plato describes human beings' sense of reality as if it were based only on the shadows cast by firelight on the walls and we remained ignorant of the light of reality outside the cave. The syntax in the passage blurs the distinction between what is inside the human viewer's mind and outside in the world that he views: the thoughts (line 41) seek in the poet's creative faculty ("the still cave of the witch Poesy") some "shade," "phantom," or "faint image" of the ravine of the Arve, and when the ravine is thereby remembered (when "the breast" from which the images has fled "recalls them"), then the ravine exists.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A supernatural being, halfway between mortals and the gods. Here it represents the force that makes earthquakes. Shelley views this landscape as the product of violent geological upheavals in the past.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Awe-filled open-mindedness.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, only through holding such a faith. Drafts of the poem support this reading: Shelley also wrote "In such wise faith with Nature reconciled" and "In such a faith."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The reference is to "voice," line 80.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Intricately formed; derived from Daedalus, builder of the labyrinth in Crete.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: This description (as well as that in lines 9–11) seems to be an echo of Coleridge’s description of the chasm and sacred river in the recently published “Kubla Khan,” lines 12–24 (see p. 491, above).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Arve, which flows into Lake Geneva. Nearby the river Rhone flows out of Lake Geneva to begin its course through France and into the Mediterranean.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *awe-inspiring*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *earlier, ancient*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thy darkness* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *the ravine*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *invisible*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *except*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tracks*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *split*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *observant*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Mont Blanc*[Return to reference °](#)

# Hymn to Intellectual Beauty<sup>1</sup>

## 1

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
Floats though unseen amongst us,—visiting  
This various world with as inconstant wing  
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.—  
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain  
5 shower,<sup>2</sup>  
It visits with inconstant glance  
Each human heart and countenance;  
Like hues and harmonies of evening,—  
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—  
Like memory of music fled,—  
10 Like aught that for its grace may be  
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

## 2

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate  
With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon  
Of human thought or form,—where art thou gone?  
15 Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,  
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?  
Ask why the sunlight not forever  
Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain river,  
Why aught<sup>o</sup> should fail and fade that once is shewn,  
20 Why fear and dream and death and birth  
Cast on the daylight of this earth  
Such gloom,—why man has such a scope

For love and hate, despondency and hope?

### 3

25 No voice from some sublimer world hath ever  
To sage or poet these responses given—  
Therefore the name of God and ghosts and  
Heaven,  
Remain the records of their vain endeavour,<sup>3</sup>  
Frail spells—whose uttered charm might not avail to  
sever,  
30 From all we hear and all we see,  
Doubt, chance, and mutability.  
Thy light alone—like mist o'er mountains driven,  
Or music by the night wind sent  
Through strings of some still instrument,  
Or moonlight on a midnight stream,  
35 Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

### 4

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart  
And come, for some uncertain moments lent.  
Man were immortal, and omnipotent,  
40 Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,  
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his  
heart.<sup>4</sup>  
Thou messenger of sympathies,  
That wax and wane in lovers' eyes—  
Thou—that to human thought art nourishment,  
45 Like darkness to a dying flame!<sup>5</sup>  
Depart not as thy shadow came,  
Depart not—lest the grave should be,  
Like life and fear, a dark reality.

## 5

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
50 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.  
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is  
fed;<sup>6</sup>  
I was not heard—I saw them not—  
When musing deeply on the lot  
55 Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing  
All vital things that wake to bring  
News of buds and blossoming,—  
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;  
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!  
60

## 6

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers  
To thee and thine—have I not kept the vow?  
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now  
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours  
65 Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned  
bowers  
Of studious zeal or love's delight  
Outwatched with me the envious night<sup>7</sup>—  
They know that never joy illumed my brow  
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free  
70 This world from its dark slavery,  
That thou—O awful LOVELINESS,  
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.

## 7

The day becomes more solemn and serene  
 When noon is past—there is a harmony  
 In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,  
 75 Which through the summer is not heard or seen,  
 As if it could not be, as if it had not been!  
 Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
 Of nature on my passive youth  
 Descended, to my onward life supply  
 80 Its calm—to one who worships thee,  
 And every form containing thee,  
 Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind  
 To fear<sup>8</sup> himself, and love all human kind.

1816

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 1: “Intellectual”: nonmaterial, that which is beyond access to the human senses. In this poem intellectual beauty is something postulated to account for occasional states of awareness that lend splendor, grace, and truth both to the natural world and to people’s moral consciousness.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Used as a verb.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The names (line 27) represent nothing better than the feeble guesses that philosophers and poets have made in attempting to answer the questions posed in stanza 2, but these guesses also delude us as though they were magic spells.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, “man would be immortal . . . if thou didst keep.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Darkness may be said to nourish the dying flame by providing the contrast that offsets its light.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Lines 49–52 refer to Shelley’s youthful experiments with magic and conjuring. In one manuscript version this line reads “I called on that false name with which our youth is fed”; the next line continues, “He answered not.” This version would have

clinched Shelley's scandalous reputation for atheism.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: That is, stayed up until the night, envious of their delight, had reluctantly departed.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Probably in the old sense: "to stand in awe of."[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *anything*[Return to reference °](#)



# Ozymandias<sup>1</sup>

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless<sup>o</sup> legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
5 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive,<sup>o</sup> stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that  
fed;<sup>2</sup>  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,  
10 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

1817

1818

## Endnotes

- Note 1: According to Diodorus Siculus, Greek historian of the 1st century B.C.E., the largest statue in Egypt had the inscription "I am Ozymandias, king of kings; if anyone wishes to know what I am and where I lie, let him surpass me in some of my exploits." Ozymandias was the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt, 13th century B.C.E. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "The hand" is the sculptor's, who had "mocked" (both imitated and satirized) the sculptured passions; "the heart" is the king's, which has "fed" his passions. [Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *without a torso*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *outlive*[Return to reference](#) °

## On Love<sup>1</sup>

What is Love? Ask him who lives what is life; ask him who adores what is God.

I know not the internal constitution of other men, nor even of thine whom I now address. I see that in some external attributes they resemble me, but when, misled by that appearance, I have thought to appeal to something in common and unburthen my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood, like one in a distant and savage land. The more opportunities they have afforded me for experience, the wider has appeared the interval between us, and to a greater distance have the points of sympathy been withdrawn. With a spirit ill-fitted to sustain such proof, trembling and feeble through its tenderness, I have every where sought, and have found only repulse and disappointment.

*Thou* demandest what is Love. It is that powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood:—this is Love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists. We are born into the world, and there is something within us, which from the instant that we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness. It is probably in correspondence with this law that the infant drains milk from the bosom of its mother; this propensity develops itself with the development of our nature. We dimly see

within our intellectual nature, a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent and lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particles of which our nature is composed:<sup>2</sup> a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our own soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise, which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble and correspond with it. The discovery of its antitype; the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating our own; an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret, with a frame, whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own; and a combination of all these in such proportion as the type within demands: this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that, without the possession of which, there is no rest nor respite to the heart over which it rules. Hence in solitude, or that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, the waters, and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring, in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart. There is eloquence in the tongueless wind, and a melody in the flowing brooks and the rustling of the reeds beside them, which by their inconceivable relation to something within the soul awaken the spirits to dance of breathless rapture, and bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eyes, like the enthusiasm of patriotic success, or the voice of one beloved singing to you alone. Sterne says that if he were in a desert he would love some cypress.<sup>3</sup> So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes a living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Shelley's essay, likely composed in the summer of 1818 just after he translated Plato's *Symposium*, first appeared in print in *The Keepsake for 1829*—a miscellany of poems, stories, and engravings, edited by Frederick Mansel Reynolds. *The Keepsake* belonged to the group of publications that, debuting in Britain in the 1820s, were known as the literary annuals: sumptuously produced, bound in silk, these books were promoted as especially appropriate and tasteful gifts to be given to young women. Mary Shelley, who supplied Reynolds with her late husband's manuscript, was herself a frequent contributor to *The Keepsake*: see "The Mortal Immortal," p. 1026, below.  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: These words are ineffectual and metaphorical. Most words are so,—no help! [*Shelley's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Paraphrase of a passage in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), in which the narrator contrasts his approach to traveling with that of travelers less easily pleased: "was I in a desert, I would find out wherewith in it to call forth my affections."[Return to reference 3](#)

## Stanzas Written in Dejection—December 1818, near Naples<sup>1</sup>

5       The Sun is warm, the sky is clear,  
The waves are dancing fast and bright,  
Blue isles and snowy mountains wear  
The purple noon's transparent might,  
The breath of the moist earth is light  
Around its unexpanded buds;  
Like many a voice of one delight  
The winds, the birds, the Ocean-floods;  
The City's voice itself is soft, like Solitude's.

10       I see the Deep's untrampled floor  
With green and purple seaweeds strown;  
I see the waves upon the shore  
Like light dissolved in star-showers, thrown;  
I sit upon the sands alone;  
The lightning of the noontide Ocean  
15       Is flashing round me, and a tone  
Arises from its measured motion,  
How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion.

20       Alas, I have nor hope nor health  
Nor peace within nor calm around,  
Nor that content surpassing wealth  
The sage<sup>2</sup> in meditation found,  
And walked with inward glory crowned;  
Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure—  
Others I see whom these surround,  
25       Smiling they live and call life pleasure:  
To me that cup has been dealt in another measure.

Yet now despair itself is mild,  
Even as the winds and waters are;  
I could lie down like a tired child  
30 And weep away the life of care  
Which I have borne and yet must bear  
Till Death like Sleep might steal on me,  
And I might feel in the warm air  
My cheek grow cold, and hear the Sea  
35 Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

Some might lament that I were cold,  
As I, when this sweet day is gone,<sup>3</sup>  
Which my lost heart, too soon grown old,  
Insults with this untimely moan—  
40 They might lament,—for I am one  
Whom men love not, and yet regret;  
Unlike this day, which, when the Sun  
Shall on its stainless glory set,  
45 Will linger though enjoyed, like joy in Memory yet.

1818

1824

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Shelley's first wife, Harriet, had drowned herself; Clara, his baby daughter with Mary Shelley, had just died; and he was plagued by ill health, pain, financial worries, and the sense that he had failed as a poet.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Probably the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (2nd century C.E.), Stoic philosopher who wrote twelve books of *Meditations*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, as I will lament this sweet day when it has gone.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Sonnet [Lift not the painted veil]

Lift not the painted veil which those who live  
Call Life; though unreal shapes be pictured there  
And it but mimic all we would believe  
With colours idly spread,—behind, lurk Fear  
And Hope, twin Destinies, who ever weave  
5 Their shadows o’er the chasm, sightless and drear.  
I knew one who had lifted it. . . . he sought,  
For his lost heart was tender, things to love  
But found them not, alas; nor was there aught  
The world contains, the which he could approve.  
10 Through the unheeding many he did move,  
A splendour among shadows—a bright blot  
Upon this gloomy scene—a Spirit that strove  
For truth, and like the Preacher, found it not.<sup>1</sup>

1818–20

1824

### Endnotes

- Note 1: Compare Ecclesiastes 1:2: “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.”[Return to reference 1](#)



**The Mask of Anarchy** On August 16, 1819, a crowd of sixty thousand, men, women, and children, gathered on St. Peter's Field in Manchester to support reform of the system of political representation. The event had been in preparation for months: the organizers aimed to make the gathering a display not just of the people's numerical strength but also their discipline. On the day, the magistrates sent in the local militia, backed up by a force of saber-wielding cavalry, to arrest one of the speakers, Henry "Orator" Hunt, and to disperse the peaceable, unarmed crowd. The ensuing mayhem left more than six hundred wounded—including men, women, and children—and resulted in at least nine deaths (tallies of the casualties, as well as estimates of the size of the crowd, have varied, starting with conflicting reports in the event's immediate aftermath, but some modern historians put the death toll as high as fifteen). The opposition press quickly circulated eyewitness accounts of the events, which came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre. The name invited a comparison to the Battle of Waterloo: that had been viewed as a national glory, but this was a national shame.

Shelley began this protest poem shortly after the news reached him in Italy, writing, as he reported, in a "torrent" of "indignation." In September he sent it to Leigh Hunt for publication in Hunt's journal the *Examiner*. Justifiably fearful that he would be charged with libel, Hunt postponed its publication until 1832. At that point, with the passage, at last, of a bill reforming Parliament, the concluding vision (in Hunt's words) of the "rise and growth of the Public Enlightenment" seemed prophetic, and the poem read as a call for peaceable reform, not violent revolution. In the 1832 printing the title was *The Masque of Anarchy*. That allusion to the masque, the performance genre celebrating aristocrats' class identity and authority, compounds the poem's ironies. Through the pageantry of the court-masque, seventeenth-century aristocrats had enacted their transcendence of the disorder personified by the vulgar performers of the anti-masque. In the upside-down world of role reversals that Shelley envisions, Anarchy—a term the British government used to stigmatize democratic reform—plays host to aristocratic revels.

# The Mask of Anarchy

*Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester*

As I lay asleep in Italy  
There came a voice from over the Sea,  
And with great power it forth led me  
To walk in the visions of Poesy.

5 I met Murder on the way—  
He had a mask like Castlereagh—  
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;<sup>1</sup>  
Seven bloodhounds followed him:

10 All were fat; and well they might  
Be in admirable plight,  
For one by one, and two by two,  
He tossed them human hearts to chew  
Which from his wide cloak he drew.

15 Next came Fraud, and he had on,  
Like Eldon, an ermined gown;<sup>2</sup>  
His big tears, for he wept well,  
Turned to mill-stones as they fell.

20 And the little children, who  
Round his feet played to and fro,  
Thinking every tear a gem,  
Had their brains knocked out by them.

Clothed with the Bible, as with light,  
And the shadows of the night,  
Like Sidmouth, next, Hypocrisy  
On a crocodile rode by.<sup>3</sup>

25      And many more Destructions played  
In this ghastly masquerade,  
All disguised, even to the eyes,  
Like Bishops, lawyers, peers<sup>o</sup> or spies.

30      Last came Anarchy: he rode  
On a white horse, splashed with blood;  
He was pale even to the lips,  
Like Death in the Apocalypse.<sup>4</sup>

And he wore a kingly crown,  
And in his grasp a sceptre shone;  
35      On his brow this mark I saw—  
"I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!"

With a pace stately and fast,  
Over English land he past,  
Trampling to a mire of blood  
40      The adoring multitude.

And a mighty troop around,  
With their trampling shook the ground,  
Waving each a bloody sword,  
For the service of their Lord.  
45

And with glorious triumph, they  
Rode through England proud and gay,  
Drunk as with intoxication  
Of the wine of desolation.

50      O'er fields and towns, from sea to sea,  
Passed the Pageant swift and free,  
Tearing up, and trampling down;  
Till they came to London town.

And each dweller, panic-stricken,

55 Felt his heart with terror sicken  
Hearing the tempestuous cry  
Of the triumph of Anarchy.

For with pomp to meet him came  
Clothed in arms like blood and flame,  
60 The hired Murderers,<sup>5</sup> who did sing  
"Thou art God, and Law, and King.

"We have waited, weak and lone  
For thy coming, Mighty One!  
Our purses are empty, our swords are cold,  
65 Give us glory, and blood, and gold."

Lawyers and priests, a motley crowd,  
To the earth their pale brows bowed;  
Like a bad prayer not over loud,  
Whispering—"Thou art Law and God."—

70 Then all cried with one accord;  
"Thou art King, and God, and Lord;  
Anarchy, to Thee we bow,  
Be thy name made holy now!"

And Anarchy, the Skeleton,  
Bowed and grinned to every one,  
75 As well as if his education  
Had cost ten millions to the Nation.<sup>6</sup>

For he knew the Palaces  
Of our Kings were rightly his;  
80 His the sceptre, crown, and globe,<sup>7</sup>  
And the gold-inwoven robe.

So he sent his slaves before  
To seize upon the Bank and Tower,<sup>8</sup>  
And was proceeding with intent

85 To meet his pensioned<sup>9</sup> Parliament

When one fled past, a maniac maid,  
And her name was Hope, she said:  
But she looked more like Despair,  
And she cried out in the air:

90 "My father Time is weak and grey  
With waiting for a better day;  
See how idiot-like he stands,  
Fumbling with his palsied hands!

"He has had child after child  
And the dust of death is piled  
95 Over every one but me—  
Misery, oh, Misery!"

Then she lay down in the street,  
Right before the horses' feet,  
Expecting, with a patient eye,  
100 Murder, Fraud and Anarchy.

When between her and her foes  
A mist, a light, an image rose,  
Small at first, and weak, and frail  
Like the vapour of a vale:<sup>1</sup>  
105

Till as clouds grow on the blast,  
Like tower-crowned giants striding fast  
And glare with lightnings as they fly,  
And speak in thunder to the sky,

110 It grew—a Shape arrayed in mail<sup>o</sup>  
Brighter than the Viper's scale,  
And upborne on wings whose grain<sup>o</sup>  
Was as the light of sunny rain.

On its helm, seen far away,  
115 A planet, like the Morning's, lay;<sup>2</sup>  
And those plumes its light rained through  
Like a shower of crimson dew.

With step as soft as wind it past  
O'er the heads of men—so fast  
120 That they knew the presence there,  
And looked,—but all was empty air.

As flowers beneath May's footstep waken  
As stars from Night's loose hair are shaken  
As waves arise when loud winds call  
125 Thoughts sprung where'er that step did fall.

And the prostrate multitude  
Looked—and ankle-deep in blood,  
Hope that maiden most serene  
Was walking with a quiet mien:

130 And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,  
Lay dead earth upon the earth—  
The Horse of Death tameless as wind  
Fled, and with his hoofs did grind  
To dust, the murderers thronged behind.

135 A rushing light of clouds and splendour,  
A sense awakening and yet tender  
Was heard and felt—and at its close  
These words of joy and fear arose

As if their own indignant Earth  
140 Which gave the sons of England birth  
Had felt their blood upon her brow,  
And shuddering with a mother's throe<sup>o</sup>

Had turned every drop of blood  
By which her face had been bedewed  
To an accent unwithstood,—  
145 As if her heart had cried aloud:

"Men of England, heirs of Glory,  
Heroes of unwritten story,  
Nurslings of one mighty Mother,  
150 Hopes of her, and one another;

"Rise like Lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number  
Shake your chains to Earth like dew  
Which in sleep had fallen on you—  
155 Ye are many—they are few.

"What is Freedom?—ye can tell  
That which slavery is, too well—  
For its very name has grown  
To an echo of your own.

" 'Tis to work and have such pay  
160 As just keeps life from day to day  
In your limbs, as in a cell  
For the tyrants' use to dwell

"So that ye for them are made  
165 Loom, and plough, and sword, and spade,  
With or without your own will bent  
To their defence and nourishment.

" 'Tis to see your children weak  
With their mothers pine and peak,<sup>o</sup>  
170 When the winter winds are bleak,—  
They are dying whilst I speak.

175       " 'Tis to hunger for such diet  
As the rich man in his riot  
Casts to the fat dogs that lie  
Surfeiting beneath his eye;

      " 'Tis to let the Ghost of Gold  
Take from Toil a thousand fold  
More than e'er its substance could  
In the tyrannies of old.<sup>3</sup>

180       "Paper coin—that forgery  
Of the title deeds, which ye  
Hold to something of the worth  
Of the inheritance of Earth.

185       " 'Tis to be a slave in soul  
And to hold no strong controul  
Over your own wills, but be  
All that others make of ye.

190       "And at length when ye complain  
With a murmur weak and vain  
'Tis to see the Tyrant's crew  
Ride over your wives and you—  
Blood is on the grass like dew.

195       "Then it is to feel revenge  
Fiercely thirsting to exchange  
Blood for blood—and wrong for wrong—  
Do not thus when ye are strong.

200       "Birds find rest, in narrow nest  
When weary of their winged quest;  
Beasts find fare, in woody lair  
When storm and snow are in the air.



"Asses, swine, have litter spread  
And with fitting food are fed;  
All things have a home but one—  
Thou, Oh, Englishman, hast none!<sup>4</sup>

205 "This is Slavery—savage men,  
Or wild beasts within a den  
Would endure not as ye do—  
But such ills they never knew.

"What art thou Freedom? O! could slaves  
210 Answer from their living graves  
This demand—tyrants would flee  
Like a dream's dim imagery:

"Thou art not, as impostors say,  
A shadow soon to pass away,  
215 A superstition, and a name  
Echoing from the cave of Fame.<sup>o</sup>

"For the labourer thou art bread,  
And a comely table spread  
From his daily labour come  
220 In a neat and happy home.

"Thou art clothes, and fire, and food  
For the trampled multitude—  
No—in countries that are free  
Such starvation cannot be  
225 As in England now we see.

"To the rich thou art a check,  
When his foot is on the neck  
Of his victim, thou dost make  
That he treads upon a snake.<sup>5</sup>

230 "Thou art Justice—ne'er for gold  
May thy righteous laws be sold  
As laws are in England—thou  
Shield'st alike the high and low.

"Thou art Wisdom—Freemen never  
Dream that God will damn for ever  
235 All who think those things untrue  
Of which Priests make such ado.

"Thou art Peace—never by thee  
Would blood and treasure wasted be  
As tyrants wasted them, when all  
240 Leagued to quench thy flame in Gaul. [◊](#)

"What if English toil and blood  
Was poured forth, even as a flood?  
It availed, Oh, Liberty!  
To dim, but not extinguish thee.  
245

"Thou art Love—the rich have kist  
Thy feet, and like him following Christ,  
Give their substance to the free  
And through the rough world follow thee [6](#)

250 "Or turn their wealth to arms, and make  
War for thy beloved sake  
On wealth, and war, and fraud—whence they  
Drew the power which is their prey.

"Science, Poetry and Thought  
Are thy lamps; they make the lot  
255 Of the dwellers in a cot [◊](#)  
So serene, they curse it not.

"Spirit, Patience, Gentleness,

260 All that can adorn and bless  
Art thou—let deeds not words express  
Thine exceeding loveliness.

265 "Let a great Assembly be  
Of the fearless and the free  
On some spot of English ground  
Where the plains stretch wide around.

"Let the blue sky overhead,  
The green earth on which ye tread,  
All that must eternal be  
Witness the solemnity.

270 "From the corners uttermost  
Of the bounds of English coast,  
From every hut, village and town  
Where those who live and suffer moan  
For others' misery or their own,

275 "From the workhouse<sup>7</sup> and the prison  
Where pale as corpses newly risen,  
Women, children, young and old  
Groan for pain, and weep for cold—

280 "From the haunts of daily life  
Where is waged the daily strife  
With common wants and common cares  
Which sows the human heart with tares<sup>8</sup>—

285 "Lastly from the palaces  
Where the murmur of distress  
Echoes, like the distant sound  
Of a wind alive around

"Those prison halls of wealth and fashion  
Where some few feel such compassion

290 For those who groan, and toil, and wail  
As must make their brethren pale—

“Ye who suffer woes untold,  
Or o to feel, or to behold  
Your lost country bought and sold  
With a price of blood and gold—

295 “Let a vast assembly be,  
And with great solemnity  
Declare with measured words that ye  
Are, as God has made ye, free—

300 “Be your strong and simple words  
Keen to wound as sharpened swords,  
And wide as targes o let them be  
With their shade to cover ye.

305 “Let the tyrants pour around  
With a quick and startling sound,  
Like the loosening of a sea  
Troops of armed emblazonry.

310 “Let the charged artillery drive  
Till the dead air seems alive  
With the clash of clanging wheels,  
And the tramp of horses’ heels.

“Let the fixed bayonet  
Gleam with sharp desire to wet  
Its bright point in English blood  
Looking keen as one for food.

315 “Let the horsemen’s scimitars  
Wheel and flash, like sphereless stars  
Thirsting to eclipse their burning  
In a sea of death and mourning.

320 "Stand ye calm and resolute,  
Like a forest close and mute,  
With folded arms and looks which are  
Weapons of unvanquished war,

"And let Panic, who outspeeds  
The career of armed steeds  
325 Pass, a disregarded shade  
Through your phalanx undismayed.

"Let the Laws of your own land,  
Good or ill, between ye stand  
Hand to hand, and foot to foot,  
330 Arbiters of the dispute,

"The old laws of England—they  
Whose reverend heads with age are grey,  
Children of a wiser day;  
And whose solemn voice must be  
335 Thine own echo—Liberty!

"On those who first should violate  
Such sacred heralds in their state  
Rest the blood that must ensue,  
And it will not rest on you.

340 "And if then the tyrants dare  
Let them ride among you there,  
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,—  
What they like, that let them do.

345 "With folded arms and steady eyes,  
And little fear, and less surprise  
Look upon them as they slay  
Till their rage has died away.

350 "Then they will return with shame  
To the place from which they came  
And the blood thus shed will speak  
In hot blushes on their cheek.

355 "Every woman in the land  
Will point at them as they stand—  
They will hardly dare to greet  
Their acquaintance in the street.

"And the bold, true warriors  
Who have hugged Danger in wars  
Will turn to those who would be free,  
Ashamed of such base company.



**Memorializing the Peterloo Massacre.** Detail from an illustration by George Cruikshank for William Hone's *A Slap at Slop and the Bridge-Street Gang* (1821), a stinging attack on the conservative press that had attempted to justify the soldiers' brutality.

"And that slaughter to the Nation  
Shall steam up like inspiration,  
Eloquent, oracular;  
A volcano heard afar.

365 "And these words shall then become  
Like oppression's thundered doom  
Ringing through each heart and brain,  
Heard again—again—again—

370 "Rise like lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number—  
Shake your chains to earth like dew  
Which in sleep had fallen on you—  
Ye are many—they are few."

1819

1832

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Viscount Castlereagh, foreign secretary and parliamentary leader of the governing Tory Party. His bloody suppression of rebellion in Ireland in 1798 and his role, following the peace of 1815, in engineering the restoration of Europe's autocrats made him a hated figure for liberals.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Baron Eldon, the lord chancellor, head of the judiciary, who in the court of Chancery denied Shelley access to Ianthe and Charles, the children born to Shelley's first wife. Fraud sports the ermine-trimmed gown customary for chief justices.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, England's home secretary, responsible for policing and internal security and so overseer of a network of spies who infiltrated radical organizations and betrayed their members to the forces of the law. Hypocrisy rides a crocodile, an animal legendarily said to weep over its human prey before devouring it. With the mention of the Bible, these lines may also allude to the huge investment in church building that in 1818 Parliament made at Sidmouth's instigation: a project of pacification targeting the industrial towns that were hotbeds of political unrest.[Return to reference 3](#)



- Note 4: Compare Saint John in Revelation 6:8: "And I looked and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him." Benjamin West's apocalyptic painting *Death on a Pale Horse*, which Shelley could have seen in London in 1817, may inform his description of Anarchy's destructive army in the next four stanzas.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, British soldiers, who wear red coats ("Clothed in arms like blood and flame").[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Anarchy shares his expensive education with the Prince Regent, who during his youth ran up enormous debts that Parliament repeatedly paid off. The allusion might also be to the ballooning of the national debt that occurred as a consequence of Britain's military expenditures.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Symbols of royal authority: the globe is the golden orb the monarch carries, with the scepter, on occasions of state.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The Bank of England, the nation's central bank, and the Tower of London, a military arsenal where the crown jewels were safeguarded.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Receiving annuities for services rendered. Parliament has been bribed.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Compare 1 Kings 18:44 when the prophet Elijah, to demonstrate God's might to King Ahab, alerts him that his land is about to be relieved from drought: "Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Venus, as the morning star.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In 1797 the Bank of England was granted the power to refuse to convert paper notes presented to it to gold coin; fearing a run on the bank's gold reserves, the government meant through this measure to safeguard the gold that it required in order to wage its war with France. This Bank Restriction Act was the precondition for the launch of England's first official paper currency ("the Ghost of Gold"). By the war's end, with the money system severed from its backing in gold, the English currency depreciated in value to a drastic extent, and with harmful effects, the purchasing power of working-class wages, which did not rise,

was correspondingly diminished. In describing the authorities as perpetrating “forgery” in creating “paper coin” (line 180), Shelley alludes to the many capital prosecutions that the bank undertook of malefactors who forged its paper notes. His lines, however, make the criminality that of the bank itself.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Compare Jesus’s warning in Matthew 8:20 to the scribe who wishes to join his followers: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Perhaps recalling the coiled snake, with the caption “Don’t tread on me,” that became an emblem of the American Revolution.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Compare Jesus’s advice to a rich man: “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me” (Matthew 19:21).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Institution conceptualized as an alternative to traditional forms of charity, in which poor people who applied for help would be confined and set to work for meager wages.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Harmful weeds. Compare Jesus’s parable of the wheat and the tares, which grow together in a single field but which at harvest time will be separated (Matthew 13:24–30).[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *nobles*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *armor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *color*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *labor pain*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *waste away*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rumor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *revolutionary France*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cottage*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *either*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *shields* [Return to reference °](#)

## England in 1819<sup>1</sup>

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;<sup>2</sup>  
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow  
Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring;  
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,  
But leechlike to their fainting country cling  
5 Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow.  
A people starved and stabbed in th' untilled field;<sup>3</sup>  
An army, whom liberticide<sup>4</sup> and prey  
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;  
Golden and sanguine laws<sup>5</sup> which tempt and slay;  
10 Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;  
A senate, Time's worst statute, unrepealed—  
Are graves from which a glorious Phantom<sup>6</sup> may  
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

1819

1839

### Endnotes

- Note 1: Knowing full well that this sonnet on a turbulent time of injustice and unrest would read as sedition, Shelley, when he sent it to Leigh Hunt, his friend and the editor of the *Examiner*, wrote, "I don't expect you to publish it, but you may show it to whom you wish." Shelley also planned to include it in a book of political poetry, "a little volume of popular songs . . . destined to awaken and direct the imagination of the reformers," but that plan came to nothing. The sonnet finally appeared as a part of a grouping of "Poems of 1819" in Mary Shelley's 1839 edition of her late husband's work.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: George III, who had been declared insane in 1811. He died in 1820.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Alluding to the Peterloo Massacre on August 16, 1819. In St. Peter's Field, near Manchester, a troop of cavalry had charged into a crowd attending a peaceful rally in support of parliamentary reform.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The killing of liberty.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Laws bought with gold and leading to bloodshed.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, a revolution.[Return to reference 6](#)

# To Sidmouth and Castlereagh<sup>1</sup>

As from their ancestral oak  
Two empty ravens wind their clarion,  
Yell by yell, and croak by croak,  
When they scent the noonday smoke  
Of fresh human carrion:—  
5  
As two gibbering night-birds flit  
From their bowers of deadly yew  
Through the night to frighten it—  
When the moon is in a fit,  
And the stars are none, or few:—  
10  
As a shark and dogfish wait  
Under an Atlantic isle  
For the Negro-ship, whose freight  
Is the theme of their debate,  
Wrinkling their red gills the while—  
15  
Are ye—two vultures sick for battle,  
Two scorpions under one wet stone,  
Two bloodless wolves whose dry throats rattle,  
Two crows perched on the murrained<sup>2</sup> cattle,  
Two vipers tangled into one.

1819 20

1832

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Shelley's powerful satire is directed against Viscount Castlereagh, foreign secretary during 1812–22, who took a leading part in the European settlement after the Battle of Waterloo, and Viscount Sidmouth (1757–1844), the home

secretary, whose cruelly coercive measures (supported by Castlereagh) against unrest in the laboring classes were in large part responsible for the Peterloo Massacre.

When this poem was reprinted by Mary Shelley in 1839, it was given the title "Similes for Two Political Characters of 1819."

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: A *murrain* is a malignant disease of domestic animals. [Return to reference 2](#)

# Ode to the West Wind<sup>1</sup>

## 1

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

5 Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic<sup>2</sup> red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O Thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring<sup>3</sup> shall blow

10 Her clarion<sup>4</sup> o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and Preserver;<sup>5</sup> hear, O hear!

## 2

15 Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's  
commotion,  
Loose clouds like Earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and  
Ocean,



Angels<sup>6</sup> of rain and lightning: there are spread  
On the blue surface of thine aery surge,  
Like the bright hair uplifted from the head  
20  
Of some fierce Mænad,<sup>7</sup> even from the dim verge  
Of the horizon to the zenith's height,  
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou Dirge  
Of the dying year, to which this closing night  
25 Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,  
Vaulted with all thy congregated might  
Of vapours,<sup>8</sup> from whose solid atmosphere  
Black rain and fire and hail will burst: O hear!

### 3

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams  
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,  
30 Lulled by the coil of his chrystalline streams,<sup>8</sup>  
Beside a pumice isle in Baiæ's bay,<sup>9</sup>  
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers  
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,  
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers  
35 So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou  
For whose path the Atlantic's level powers  
Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below  
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear  
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know  
40  
Thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear,  
And tremble and despoil themselves:<sup>1</sup> O hear!

## 4

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;  
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;  
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share  
45  
The impulse of thy strength, only less free  
Than thou, O Uncontrollable! If even  
I were as in my boyhood, and could be  
The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,  
50 As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed  
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven  
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
55 One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

## 5

Make me thy lyre,<sup>2</sup> even as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies  
60 Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!  
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!<sup>3</sup>  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

65 Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

70

1819

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains [*Shelley's note*]. As in other major Romantic poems—for example, the opening of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," and the conclusion to Shelley's *Adonais*—the rising wind, linked with the cycle of the seasons, is presented as the correspondent in the external world to an inner change, a burst of creative power. In many languages the words for wind, breath, soul, and inspiration

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Referring to the kind of fever that occurs in tuberculosis. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The west wind that will blow in the spring. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A high, shrill trumpet. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Refers to the Hindu gods Siva the Destroyer and Vishnu the Preserver. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In the old sense of messengers. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A female worshiper who danced frenziedly in the worship of Dionysus (Bacchus), the Greek god of wine and vegetation. As vegetation god he was fabled to die in the fall and to be resurrected in the spring. [Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: The currents that flow in the Mediterranean Sea, sometimes with a visible difference in color.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: West of Naples, the locale of imposing villas built in the glory days of imperial Rome. Their ruins are reflected in the waters of the bay, a sight Mary Shelley also describes in the Introduction to *The Last Man* (see p. 1022, below).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The vegetation at the bottom of the sea . . . sympathizes with that of the land in the change of seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it [*Shelley's note*].[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Eolian lyre, which responds to the wind with rising and falling musical chords.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This line may play on the secondary sense of "leaves" as pages in a book.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *clouds*[Return to reference °](#)

**Prometheus Unbound** Shelley composed this work in Italy between the autumn of 1818 and the spring of 1819. After adding a fourth act, he published it the following summer. Upon its completion he wrote in a letter, "It is a drama, with characters and mechanism of a kind yet unattempted; and I think the execution is better than any of my former attempts." It is based on the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, which dramatizes the sufferings of Prometheus, unrepentant champion of humanity, who, because he had stolen fire from heaven, was condemned by Zeus to be chained to Mount Caucasus and to be tortured by a vulture feeding on his liver; in a lost sequel Aeschylus reconciled Prometheus with his oppressor. Shelley continued Aeschylus's story but transformed it into a symbolic drama about the origin of evil and the possibility of overcoming it. In such early writings as *Queen Mab*, Shelley had expressed his belief that injustice and suffering could be eliminated by an external revolution that would wipe out or radically reform the causes of evil, attributed to existing social, political, and religious institutions. Implicit in *Prometheus Unbound*, on the other hand, is the view that both evil and the possibility of reform are the moral responsibility of men and women. Social chaos and wars are a gigantic projection of human moral disorder and inner division and conflict; tyrants are the outer representatives of the tyranny of our baser over our better elements; hatred for others is a product of self-contempt; and external political reform is impossible unless we have first reformed our own nature at its roots, by substituting selfless love for divisive hatred. Shelley thus incorporates into his secular myth—of universal regeneration by a triumph of humanity's moral imagination—the ethical teaching of Christ on the Mount, together with the classical morality represented in the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus.

# ***From* PROMETHEUS UNBOUND**

## ***A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts***

Audisne hæc Amphiaræ, sub terram abdite?<sup>1</sup>

### ***Preface***

The Greek tragic writers, in selecting as their subject any portion of their national history or mythology, employed in their treatment of it a certain arbitrary discretion. They by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation or to imitate in story as in title their rivals and predecessors. Such a system would have amounted to a resignation of those claims to preference over their competitors which incited the composition. The Agamemnonian story was exhibited on the Athenian theatre with as many variations as dramas.

I have presumed to employ a similar licence.—The *Prometheus Unbound* of Æschylus, supposed the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim as the price of the disclosure of the danger threatened to his empire by the consummation of his marriage with Thetis. Thetis, according to this view of the subject, was given in marriage to Peleus, and Prometheus by the permission of Jupiter delivered from his captivity by Hercules.<sup>2</sup>—Had I framed my story on this model I should have done no more than have attempted to restore the lost drama of Æschylus; an ambition, which, if my preference to this mode of treating the subject had incited me to cherish, the recollection of the high comparison such an attempt would challenge, might well abate. But in truth I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of

Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language, and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary. The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan because, in addition to courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry<sup>3</sup> which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling, it engenders something worse. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.

This Poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades, and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the air. The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening of spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama.

The imagery which I have employed will be found in many instances to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed. This is unusual in modern Poetry; although Dante and Shakespeare are full of instances of the same kind: Dante indeed more than any other poet and with greater success. But the Greek poets, as writers to whom no resource of awakening the sympathy of their contemporaries was unknown, were in the habitual use of this power, and it is the study of their works (since a higher merit would probably be denied me) to which I am willing that my readers should impute this singularity.

One word is due in candour to the degree in which the study of contemporary writings may have tinged my composition, for such has been a topic of censure with regard to poems far more popular, and indeed more deservedly popular than mine. It is impossible that any one who inhabits the same age with such writers as those who stand in the foremost ranks of our own, can conscientiously assure himself, that his language and tone of thought may not have been modified by the study of the productions of those extraordinary intellects. It is true, that, not the spirit of their genius, but the forms in which it has manifested itself, are due, less to the peculiarities of their own minds, than to the peculiarity of the moral and intellectual condition of the minds among which they have been produced. Thus a number of writers possess the form, whilst they want the spirit of those whom, it is alleged, they imitate; because the former is the endowment of the age in which they live, and the latter must be the uncommunicated lightning of their own mind.

The peculiar style of intense and comprehensive imagery which distinguishes the modern literature of England, has not been, as a general power, the product of the imitation of any particular writer. The mass of capabilities remains at every period materially the same; the circumstances which awaken it to action perpetually change. If England were divided into forty republics, each equal in population and extent to Athens, there is no reason to suppose but that, under institutions not more perfect than those of Athens, each would produce philosophers and poets equal to those who (if we except Shakespeare) have never been surpassed. We owe the great writers of the golden age of our literature to that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian Religion. We owe Milton to the progress and developement of the same spirit; the sacred Milton was, let it ever be remembered, a Republican,<sup>4</sup> and a bold enquirer into morals and religion. The great writers of our own age are, we have reason to suppose, the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it. The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning,



and the equilibrium between institutions and opinions is now restoring, or is about to be restored.<sup>5</sup>

As to imitation; Poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. Poetical abstractions are beautiful and new, not because the portions of which they are composed had no previous existence in the mind of man or in nature, but because the whole produced by their combination has some intelligible and beautiful analogy with those sources of emotion and thought, and with the contemporary condition of them: one great poet is a masterpiece of nature, which another not only ought to study but must study. He might as wisely and as easily determine that his mind should no longer be the mirror of all that is lovely in the visible universe, as exclude from his contemplation the beautiful which exists in the writings of a great contemporary. The pretence of doing it would be a presumption in any but the greatest; the effect, even in him, would be strained, unnatural and ineffectual. A Poet, is the combined product of such internal powers as modify the nature of others, and of such external influences as excite and sustain these powers; he is not one, but both. Every man's mind is in this respect modified by all the objects of nature and art, by every word and every suggestion which he ever admitted to act upon his consciousness; it is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected, and in which they compose one form. Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors and musicians, are in one sense the creators and in another the creations of their age. From this subjection the loftiest do not escape. There is a similarity between Homer and Hesiod, between Æschylus and Euripides, between Virgil and Horace, between Dante and Petrarch, between Shakespeare and Fletcher, between Dryden and Pope; each has a generic resemblance under which their specific distinctions are arranged. If this similarity be the result of imitation, I am willing to confess that I have imitated.

Let this opportunity be conceded to me of acknowledging that I have, what a Scotch philosopher characteristically terms, "a passion for reforming the world:"<sup>6</sup> what passion incited him to write and

publish his book, he omits to explain. For my part I had rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon, than go to Heaven with Paley and Malthus.<sup>7</sup> But it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a reasoned system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse. My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness. Should I live to accomplish what I purpose, that is, produce a systematical history of what appear to me to be the genuine elements of human society,<sup>8</sup> let not the advocates of injustice and superstition flatter themselves that I should take Æschylus rather than Plato as my model.

The having spoken of myself with unaffected freedom will need little apology with the candid; and let the uncandid consider that they injure me less than their own hearts and minds by misrepresentation. Whatever talents a person may possess to amuse and instruct others, be they ever so inconsiderable, he is yet bound to exert them: if his attempt be ineffectual, let the punishment of an unaccomplished purpose have been sufficient; let none trouble themselves to heap the dust of oblivion upon his efforts; the pile they raise will betray his grave which might otherwise have been unknown.

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.60: "Do you hear this, O Amphiaraus, concealed under the earth?" In Greek myth

Amphiaraus was a seer. Fleeing from an unsuccessful assault on Thebes, he was saved from his pursuers by Zeus, who by a thunderbolt opened a cleft in the earth that swallowed him up.

In his *Disputations* Cicero is arguing for the Stoic doctrine of the need to master pain and suffering. He quotes this line (a Latin translation from Aeschylus's lost drama *Epigoni*) in the course of an anecdote about Dionysius of Heraclea, who, tormented by kidney stones, abjures the doctrine of his Stoic teacher Zeno that pain is not an evil. By way of reproof his

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Shelley's description of the subject of Aeschylus's lost drama *Prometheus Unbound* is a speculation based on surviving fragments.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Slippery reasoning.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, Milton hoped that the overthrow of the monarchy during the Civil Wars would lead to England's rebirth as a republic.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: See Shelley's similar tribute to his great contemporaries in the concluding paragraph of his "Defence of Poetry" (p. 879, below).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: This is the title of chap. 16 in *The Principles of Moral Science* (1805), by the Scottish writer Robert Forsyth.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) argued that the rate of increase in population will soon exceed the rate of increase in the food supply necessary to sustain it. William Paley wrote *Evidences of Christianity* (1794), which undertakes to prove that the design apparent in natural phenomena, and especially in the human body, entails the existence of God as the great Designer. Shelley ironically expresses his contempt for the doctrines of both these thinkers, which he conceives as arguments for accepting uncomplainingly the present state of the world.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Shelley did not live to write this history.[Return to reference 8](#)

# Prometheus Unbound

## Act 1

SCENE: *A Ravine of Icy Rocks in the Indian Caucasus.* PROMETHEUS *is discovered bound to the Precipice.* PANTHEA and IONE<sup>1</sup> *are seated at his feet. Time, Night. During the Scene, Morning slowly breaks.*

PROMETHEUS    Monarch of Gods and Dæmons,<sup>2</sup> and all  
                         Spirits  
                         But One,<sup>3</sup> who throng those bright and rolling  
                         Worlds  
                         Which Thou and I alone of living things  
                         Behold with sleepless eyes! regard this Earth  
5                    Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou  
                         Requitest for knee-worship, prayer and praise,  
                         And toil, and hecatombs<sup>4</sup> of broken hearts,  
                         With fear and self contempt and barren hope;  
                         Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless<sup>o</sup> in hate,  
10                    Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn,  
                         O'er mine own misery and thy vain revenge.—  
                         Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours  
                         And moments—aye<sup>o</sup> divided by keen pangs  
                         Till they seemed years, torture and solitude,  
15                    Scorn and despair,—these are mine empire:—  
                         More glorious far than that which thou surveyest  
                         From thine unenvied throne, O Mighty God!  
                         Almighty, had I deigned<sup>5</sup> to share the shame  
                         Of thine ill tyranny, and hung not here  
20                    Nailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mountain,  
                         Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb,<sup>o</sup>  
                         Insect, or beast, or shape or sound of life.

Ah me, alas, pain, pain ever, forever!

No change, no pause, no hope!—Yet I endure.

25 I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt?  
I ask yon Heaven—the all-beholding Sun,  
Has it not seen? The Sea, in storm or calm,  
Heaven's ever-changing Shadow, spread below—  
Have its deaf waves not heard my agony?  
30 Ah me, alas, pain, pain ever, forever!

The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears  
Of their moon-freezing chrystals; the bright chains  
Eat with their burning cold into my bones.  
Heaven's winged hound, polluting from thy lips  
35 His beak in poison not his own, tears up  
My heart;<sup>6</sup> and shapeless sights come wandering  
by,  
The ghastly people of the realm of dream,  
Mocking me: and the Earthquake-fiends are  
charged  
To wrench the rivets from my quivering wounds  
40 When the rocks split and close again behind;  
While from their loud abysses howling throng  
The genii of the storm, urging the rage  
Of whirlwind, and afflict me with keen hail.  
And yet to me welcome is Day and Night,  
45 Whether one breaks the hoar frost of the morn,  
Or starry, dim, and slow, the other climbs  
The leaden-coloured East; for then they lead  
Their wingless, crawling Hours,<sup>7</sup> one among whom  
—As some dark Priest hailes<sup>o</sup> the reluctant victim—  
50 Shall drag thee, cruel King, to kiss the blood  
From these pale feet,<sup>8</sup> which then might trample  
thee  
If they disdained not such a prostrate slave.

Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.<sup>9</sup>—What Ruin  
Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!  
How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,  
55 Gape like a Hell within! I speak in grief,  
Not exultation, for I hate no more,  
As then, ere misery made me wise.—The Curse  
Once breathed on thee I would recall.<sup>1</sup> Ye  
Mountains,  
60 Whose many-voiced Echoes, through the mist  
Of cataracts, flung the thunder of that spell!  
Ye icy Springs, stagnant with wrinkling frost,  
Which vibrated to hear me, and then crept  
Shuddering through India! Thou serenest Air,  
65 Through which the Sun walks burning without  
beams!  
And ye swift Whirlwinds, who on poised wings  
Hung mute and moveless o'er yon hushed abyss,  
As thunder louder than your own made rock  
The orb'd world! If then my words had power  
—Though I am changed so that aught evil wish  
70 Is dead within, although no memory be  
Of what is hate—let them not lose it now!<sup>2</sup>  
What was that curse? for ye all heard me speak.

FIRST VOICE: *from the Mountains*

Thrice three hundred thousand years  
O'er the Earthquake's couch we stood;  
75 Oft as men convulsed with fears  
We trembled in our multitude.

SECOND VOICE: *from the Springs*

Thunderbolts had parched out water,  
We had been stained with bitter blood,  
And had run mute 'mid shrieks of slaughter  
80 Through a city and a solitude!

THIRD VOICE: *from the Air*  
I had clothed since Earth uprose  
Its wastes in colours not their own,  
And oft had my serene repose  
85 Been cloven by many a rending groan.

FOURTH VOICE: *from the Whirlwinds*  
We had soared beneath these mountains  
Unresting ages;—nor had thunder  
Nor yon Volcano's flaming fountains  
Nor any power above or under  
90 Ever made us mute with wonder!

FIRST VOICE  
But never bowed our snowy crest  
As at the voice of thine unrest.

SECOND VOICE  
Never such a sound before  
To the Indian waves we bore.—  
95 A pilot asleep on the howling sea  
Leaped up from the deck in agony  
And heard, and cried, "Ah, woe is me!"  
And died as mad as the wild waves be.

THIRD VOICE  
By such dread words from Earth to Heaven  
My still realm was never riven;  
100 When its wound was closed, there stood  
Darkness o'er the Day, like blood.

FOURTH VOICE  
And we shrank back—for dreams of ruin  
To frozen caves our flight pursuing  
Made us keep silence—thus—and thus—

105                    Though silence is as hell to us.

THE EARTH

The tongueless Caverns of the craggy hills  
Cried "Misery!" then; the hollow Heaven replied,  
"Misery!" And the Ocean's purple waves,  
110 Climbing the land, howled to the lashing winds.  
And the pale nations heard it,—"Misery!"

PROMETHEUS

I hear a sound of voices—not the voice  
Which I gave forth.—Mother, <sup>o</sup> thy sons and thou  
Scorn him, without whose all-enduring will  
Beneath the fierce omnipotence of Jove  
115 Both they and thou had vanished like thin mist  
Unrolled on the morning wind!—Know ye not me,  
The Titan, he who made his agony  
The barrier to your else all-conquering foe?  
O rock-embosomed lawns and snow-fed streams  
120     Now seen athwart frore vapours <sup>3</sup> deep below,  
Through whose o'er-shadowing woods I wandered  
once  
With Asia, drinking life from her loved eyes;  
Why scorns the spirit which informs ye, now  
To commune with me? me alone, who checked—  
125 As one who checks a fiend-drawn charioteer—  
The falshood and the force of Him who reigns  
Supreme, and with the groans of pining slaves  
Fills your dim glens and liquid wildernesses?  
Why answer ye not, still? brethren!

THE EARTH

130                    They dare not.

PROMETHEUS

Who dares? for I would hear that curse again. . . .



Ha, what an awful whisper rises up!  
'Tis scarce like sound, it tingles through the frame  
As lightning tingles, hovering ere it strike.—  
135 Speak, Spirit! from thine inorganic voice  
I only know that thou art moving near  
And love. How cursed I him?

THE EARTH

How canst thou hear  
Who knowest not the language of the dead?

PROMETHEUS

Thou art a living spirit—speak as they.

THE EARTH

140 I dare not speak like life, lest Heaven's fell<sup>o</sup> King  
Should hear, and link me to some wheel of pain  
More torturing than the one whereon I roll.—  
Subtle thou art and good, and though the Gods  
Hear not this voice—yet thou art more than God  
145 Being wise and kind—earnestly hearken now.—

PROMETHEUS

Obscurely through my brain like shadows dim  
Sweep awful<sup>o</sup> thoughts, rapid and thick.—I feel  
Faint, like one mingled in entwining love,  
Yet 'tis not pleasure.

THE EARTH

No, thou canst not hear:  
150 Thou art immortal, and this tongue is known  
Only to those who die . . .

PROMETHEUS

And what art thou,  
O melancholy Voice?

THE EARTH

I am the Earth,

Thy mother, she within whose stony veins  
To the last fibre of the loftiest tree  
Whose thin leaves trembled in the frozen air  
155 Joy ran, as blood within a living frame,  
When thou didst from her bosom, like a cloud  
Of glory, arise, a spirit of keen joy!  
And at thy voice her pining sons uplifted  
Their prostrate brows from the polluting dust  
160 And our almighty Tyrant with fierce dread  
Grew pale—until his thunder chained thee here.—  
Then—see those million worlds which burn and roll  
Around us: their inhabitants beheld  
My sphered light wane in wide Heaven; the sea  
165 Was lifted by strange tempest, and new fire  
From earthquake-rifted mountains of bright snow  
Shook its portentous hair beneath Heaven's frown;  
Lightning and Inundation vexed the plains;  
Blue thistles bloomed in cities; foodless toads  
170 Within voluptuous chambers panting crawled;  
When Plague had fallen on man and beast and  
worm,  
And Famine,—and black blight on herb and tree,  
And in the corn and vines and meadow-grass  
Teemed ineradicable poisonous weeds  
175 Draining their growth, for my wan breast was dry  
With grief,—and the thin air, my breath, was stained  
With the contagion of a mother's hate  
Breathed on her child's destroyer—aye, I heard  
Thy curse, the which if thou rememberest not  
180 Yet my innumerable seas and streams,  
Mountains and caves and winds, and yon wide Air  
And the inarticulate people of the dead  
Preserve, a treasured spell. We meditate

185 In secret joy and hope those dreadful words  
But dare not speak them.

PROMETHEUS

Venerable Mother!

All else who live and suffer take from thee  
Some comfort; flowers and fruits and happy sounds  
And love, though fleeting; these may not be mine.  
But mine own words, I pray, deny me not.  
190

THE EARTH

They shall be told.—Ere Babylon was dust,  
The Magus Zoroaster,<sup>4</sup> my dead child,  
Met his own image walking in the garden.  
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.  
For know there are two worlds of life and death:  
195 One that which thou beholdest, but the other  
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
The shadows of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them, and they part no more;  
Dreams and the light imaginings of men  
200 And all that faith creates, or love desires,  
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.  
There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade  
'Mid whirlwind-peopled mountains; all the Gods  
Are there, and all the Powers of nameless worlds,  
205 Vast, sceptred Phantoms; heroes, men, and beasts;  
And Demogorgon,<sup>5</sup> a tremendous Gloom;  
And he, the Supreme Tyrant,<sup>6</sup> on his throne  
Of burning Gold. Son, one of these shall utter  
The curse which all remember. Call at will  
210 Thine own ghost, or the ghost of Jupiter,  
Hades or Typhon,<sup>7</sup> or what mightier Gods  
From all-prolific Evil, since thy ruin  
Have sprung, and trampled on my prostrate sons.—

215 Ask and they must reply—so the revenge  
Of the Supreme may sweep through vacant shades  
As rainy wind through the abandoned gate  
Of a fallen palace.

PROMETHEUS

Mother, let not aught  
Of that which may be evil, pass again  
My lips, or those of aught resembling me.—  
220 Phantasm of Jupiter, arise, appear!

IONE

My wings are folded o'er mine ears,  
My wings are crossed over mine eyes,  
Yet through their silver shade appears  
And through their lulling plumes arise  
225 A Shape, a throng of sounds:  
May it be, no ill to thee<sup>8</sup>  
O thou of many wounds!  
Near whom for our sweet sister's sake  
Ever thus we watch and wake.  
230

PANTHEA

The sound is of whirlwind underground,  
Earthquake and fire, and mountains cloven,—  
The Shape is awful like the sound,  
Clothed in dark purple, star-inwoven.  
A sceptre of pale gold  
235 To stay steps proud, o'er the slow cloud  
His veined hand doth hold.  
Cruel he looks but calm and strong  
Like one who does, not suffers wrong.

PHANTASM OF JUPITER

240 Why have the secret powers of this strange world  
Driven me, a frail and empty phantom, hither

On direst storms? What unaccustomed sounds  
Are hovering on my lips, unlike the voice  
With which our pallid race hold ghastly talk  
In darkness? And, proud Sufferer, who art thou?  
245

PROMETHEUS

Tremendous Image! as thou art must be  
He whom thou shadowest forth. I am his foe  
The Titan. Speak the words which I would hear,  
Although no thought inform thine empty voice.

THE EARTH

Listen! and though your echoes must be mute,  
250 Grey mountains and old woods and haunted springs,  
Prophetic caves and isle-surrounding streams  
Rejoice to hear what yet ye cannot speak.

PHANTASM

A spirit seizes me, and speaks within:  
It tears me as fire tears a thunder-cloud!  
255

PANTHEA

See how he lifts his mighty looks, the Heaven  
Darkens above.

IONE

He speaks! O shelter me—

PROMETHEUS

I see the curse on gestures proud and cold,  
And looks of firm defiance, and calm hate,  
And such despair as mocks itself with smiles,  
260 Written as on a scroll . . . yet speak—O speak!

PHANTASM

Fiend, I defy thee! with a calm, fixed mind,  
All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do;

Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Humankind,  
One only being shalt thou not subdue.  
265 Rain then thy plagues upon me here,  
Ghastly disease and frenzying fear;  
And let alternate frost and fire  
Eat into me, and be thine ire  
270 Lightning and cutting hail and legioned forms  
Of furies, driving by upon the wounding storms.

Aye, do thy worst. Thou art Omnipotent.  
O'er all things but thyself I gave thee power,  
And my own will. Be thy swift mischiefs sent  
To blast mankind, from yon etherial tower.  
275 Let thy malignant spirit move  
Its darkness over those I love:  
On me and mine I imprecate<sup>o</sup>  
The utmost torture of thy hate  
And thus devote to sleepless agony  
280 This undeclining head while thou must reign on high.

But thou who art the God and Lord—O thou  
Who fillest with thy soul this world of woe,  
To whom all things of Earth and Heaven do bow  
In fear and worship—all-prevailing foe!  
285 I curse thee! let a sufferer's curse  
Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse,  
Till thine Infinity shall be  
A robe of envenomed agony;<sup>9</sup>  
And thine Omnipotence a crown of pain  
290 To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain.

Heap on thy soul by virtue of this Curse  
Ill deeds, then be thou damned, beholding good,  
Both infinite as is the Universe,  
And thou, and thy self-torturing solitude.  
295 An awful Image of calm power

Though now thou sittest, let the hour  
Come, when thou must appear to be  
That which thou art internally.  
300 And after many a false and fruitless crime  
Scorn track thy lagging fall through boundless space  
and time.

[ *The Phantasm*

*vanishes.*]

PROMETHEUS Were these my words, O Parent?

THE EARTH They were thine.

PROMETHEUS It doth repent me: words are quick and  
vain;

Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine.  
305 I wish no living thing to suffer pain.

THE EARTH

Misery, O misery to me,  
That Jove at length should vanquish thee.  
Wail, howl aloud, Land and Sea,  
The Earth's rent heart shall answer ye.  
310 Howl, Spirits of the living and the dead,  
Your refuge, your defence lies fallen and vanquished.

FIRST ECHO

Lies fallen and vanquished?

SECOND ECHO

Fallen and vanquished!

IONE

Fear not—'tis but some passing spasm,  
The Titan is unvanquished still.  
315 But see, where through the azure chasm  
Of yon forked and snowy hill,  
Trampling the slant winds on high  
With golden-sandalled feet, that glow

320 Under plumes of purple dye  
Like rose-ensanguined<sup>1</sup> ivory,  
A Shape comes now,  
Stretching on high from his right hand  
A serpent-cinctured<sup>2</sup> wand.

PANTHEA

325 'Tis Jove's world-wandering Herald, Mercury.

IONE

And who are those with hydra tresses<sup>3</sup>  
And iron wings that climb the wind,  
Whom the frowning God represses  
Like vapours steaming up behind,  
330 Clanging loud, an endless crowd—

PANTHEA

These are Jove's tempest-walking hounds,<sup>4</sup>  
Whom he gluts with groans and blood,  
When charioted on sulphurous cloud  
He bursts Heaven's bounds.

IONE

335 Are they now led, from the thin dead  
On new pangs to be fed?

PANTHEA

The Titan looks as ever, firm, not proud.

FIRST FURY

Ha! I scent life!

SECOND FURY

Let me but look into his eyes!

THIRD FURY



340 The hope of torturing him smells like a heap  
Of corpses to a death-bird after battle!

FIRST FURY

Darest thou delay, O Herald! take cheer, Hounds  
Of Hell—what if the Son of Maia<sup>o</sup> soon  
Should make us food and sport? Who can please  
long  
The Omnipotent?

MERCURY

345 Back to your towers of iron  
And gnash, beside the streams of fire, and wail  
Your foodless teeth! . . . Geryon, arise! and Gorgon,<sup>5</sup>  
Chimæra,<sup>6</sup> and thou Sphinx, subtlest of fiends,  
Who ministered to Thebes Heaven's poisoned wine,  
Unnatural love and more unnatural hate:<sup>7</sup>  
These shall perform your task.

FIRST FURY

350 O mercy! mercy!  
We die with our desire—drive us not back!

MERCURY

Crouch then in silence.—  
Awful<sup>o</sup> Sufferer!  
To thee unwilling, most unwillingly  
I come, by the great Father's will driven down  
To execute a doom of new revenge.  
355 Alas! I pity thee, and hate myself  
That I can do no more.—Aye from thy sight  
Returning, for a season, Heaven seems Hell,  
So thy worn form pursues me night and day,  
Smiling reproach. Wise art thou, firm and good,  
360 But vainly wouldst stand forth alone in strife  
Against the Omnipotent, as yon clear lamps

That measure and divide the weary years  
From which there is no refuge, long have taught  
And long must teach.—Even now thy Torturer arms  
365 With the strange might of unimagined pains  
The powers who scheme slow agonies in Hell,  
And my commission is, to lead them here,  
Or what more subtle, o foul or savage fiends  
People o the abyss, and leave them to their task.  
370 Be it not so! . . . There is a secret known  
To thee and to none else of living things  
Which may transfer the sceptre of wide Heaven,  
The fear of which perplexes the Supreme . . .  
Clothe it in words, and bid it clasp his throne  
375 In intercession; bend thy soul in prayer  
And like a suppliant in some gorgeous fane o  
Let the will kneel within thy haughty heart;  
For benefits and meek submission tame  
The fiercest and the mightiest.

PROMETHEUS

Evil minds

380 Change good to their own nature. I gave all  
He has; and in return he chains me here  
Years, ages, night and day: whether the Sun  
Split my parched skin, or in the moony night  
The chrystal-winged snow cling round my hair—  
385 Whilst my beloved race is trampled down  
By his thought-executing ministers.  
Such is the tyrant's recompense—'tis just:  
He who is evil can receive no good;  
And for a world bestowed, or a friend lost,  
390 He can feel hate, fear, shame—not gratitude:  
He but requites me for his own misdeed.  
Kindness to such is keen reproach, which breaks  
With bitter stings the light sleep of Revenge.  
Submission, thou dost know, I cannot try:

395 For what submission but that fatal word,  
The death-seal of mankind's captivity—  
Like the Sicilian's hair-suspended sword<sup>8</sup>  
Which trembles o'er his crown—would he accept,  
Or could I yield?—which yet I will not yield.  
400 Let others flatter Crime where it sits throned  
In brief Omnipotence; secure are they:  
For Justice when triumphant will weep down  
Pity not punishment on her own wrongs,  
Too much avenged by those who err. I wait,  
405 Enduring thus the retributive hour<sup>9</sup>  
Which since we spake is even nearer now.—  
But hark, the hell-hounds clamour. Fear delay!  
Behold! Heaven lowers<sup>o</sup> under thy Father's frown.

MERCURY

410 O that we might be spared—I to inflict  
And thou to suffer! Once more answer me:  
Thou knowest not the period<sup>1</sup> of Jove's power?

PROMETHEUS

I know but this, that it must come.

MERCURY

Alas!

Thou canst not count thy years to come of pain?

PROMETHEUS

415 They last while Jove must reign, nor more nor less  
Do I desire or fear.

MERCURY

Yet pause, and plunge  
Into Eternity, where recorded time,  
Even all that we imagine, age on age,  
Seems but a point, and the reluctant mind

420       Flags wearily in its unending flight  
Till it sink, dizzy, blind, lost, shelterless;  
Perchance it has not numbered the slow years  
Which thou must spend in torture, unreprieved.

PROMETHEUS

Perchance no thought can count them—yet they  
pass.

MERCURY

425       If thou might'st dwell among the Gods the while  
Lapped in voluptuous joy?—

PROMETHEUS

I would not quit  
This bleak ravine, these unrepentant pains.

MERCURY

Alas! I wonder at, yet pity thee.

PROMETHEUS

430       Pity the self-despising slaves of Heaven,  
Not me, within whose mind sits peace serene  
As light in the sun, throned. . . . How vain is talk!  
Call up the fiends.

IONE

O sister, look! White fire  
Has cloven to the roots yon huge snow-loaded  
Cedar;  
How fearfully God's thunder howls behind!

MERCURY

435       I must obey his words and thine—alas!  
Most heavily remorse hangs at my heart!

PANTHEA

See where the child of Heaven with winged feet  
Runs down the slanted sunlight of the dawn.

IONE

440 Dear sister, close thy plumes over thine eyes  
Lest thou behold and die—they come, they come  
Blackening the birth of day with countless wings,  
And hollow underneath, like death.

FIRST FURY

Prometheus!

SECOND FURY

Immortal Titan!

THIRD FURY

Champion of Heaven's slaves!

PROMETHEUS

445 He whom some dreadful voice invokes is here,  
Prometheus, the chained Titan.—Horrible forms,  
What and who are ye? Never yet there came  
Phantasms<sup>o</sup> so foul through monster-teeming Hell  
From the all-miscreative brain of Jove;  
Whilst I behold such execrable shapes,  
450 Methinks I grow like what I contemplate  
And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy.

FIRST FURY

455 We are the ministers of pain and fear  
And disappointment and mistrust and hate  
And clinging<sup>o</sup> crime; and as lean dogs pursue  
Through wood and lake some struck and sobbing  
fawn,  
We track all things that weep and bleed and live  
When the great King betrays them to our will.

PROMETHEUS

O many fearful natures in one name!  
I know ye, and these lakes and echoes know  
The darkness and the clangour of your wings.  
460 But why more hideous than your loathed selves  
Gather ye up in legions from the deep?

SECOND FURY

We knew not that—Sisters, rejoice, rejoice!

PROMETHEUS

Can aught exult in its deformity?

SECOND FURY

The beauty of delight makes lovers glad  
465 Gazing on one another—so are we.  
As from the rose which the pale priestess kneels  
To gather for her festal crown of flowers  
The aerial crimson falls, flushing her cheek—  
So from our victim's destined agony  
470 The shade which is our form invests us round,  
Else we are shapeless as our Mother Night.

PROMETHEUS

I laugh your power and his who sent you here  
To lowest scorn.—Pour forth the cup of pain.

FIRST FURY

Thou thinkest we will rend thee bone from bone?  
475 And nerve from nerve, working like fire within?

PROMETHEUS

Pain is my element as hate is thine;  
Ye rend me now: I care not.

SECOND FURY

Dost imagine  
We will but laugh into thy lidless eyes?

PROMETHEUS

480 I weigh<sup>o</sup> not what ye do, but what ye suffer  
Being evil. Cruel was the Power which called  
You, or aught else so wretched, into light.

THIRD FURY

485 Thou think'st we will live through thee, one by one,  
Like animal life, and though we can obscure not  
The soul which burns within, that we will dwell  
Beside it, like a vain loud multitude  
Vexing the self-content of wisest men—  
That we will be dread thought beneath thy brain  
And foul desire round thine astonished heart  
And blood within thy labyrinthine veins  
490 Crawling like agony.

PROMETHEUS

Why, ye are thus now;  
Yet am I king over myself, and rule  
The torturing and conflicting throngs within  
As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous.

CHORUS OF FURIES

495 From the ends of the Earth, from the ends of the  
Earth,  
Where the night has its grave and the morning its  
birth,  
Come, Come, Come!  
O yet who shake hills with the scream of your mirth  
When cities sink howling in ruin, and ye  
Who with wingless footsteps trample the Sea,  
500 And close upon Shipwreck and Famine's track  
Sit chattering with joy on the foodless wrack;

Come, Come, Come!  
Leave the bed, low, cold and red,  
Strewed beneath a nation dead;  
505 Leave the hatred—as in ashes  
Fire is left for future burning,—  
It will burst in bloodier flashes  
When ye stir it, soon returning;  
Leave the self-contempt implanted  
510 In young spirits sense-enchanted,  
Misery's yet unkindled fuel;  
Leave Hell's secrets half-enchanted  
To the maniac dreamer: cruel  
More than ye can be with hate,  
515 Is he with fear.  
Come, Come, Come!  
We are steaming up from Hell's wide gate  
And we burthen the blasts of the atmosphere,  
But vainly we toil till ye come here.  
520

IONE

Sister, I hear the thunder of new wings.

PANTHEA

These solid mountains quiver with the sound  
Even as the tremulous air:—their shadows make  
The space within my plumes more black than night.

FIRST FURY

525 Your call was as a winged car<sup>o</sup>  
Driven on whirlwinds fast and far;  
It rapt<sup>o</sup> us from red gulphs of war—

SECOND FURY

From wide cities, famine-wasted—

THIRD FURY



Groans half heard, and blood untasted—

FOURTH FURY

530 Kingly conclaves, stern and cold,  
Where blood with gold is bought and sold—

FIFTH FURY

From the furnace, white and hot,  
In which—

A FURY

535 Speak not—whisper not!  
I know all that ye would tell,  
But to speak might break the spell  
Which must bend the Invincible,  
The stern of thought;  
He yet defies the deepest power of Hell.

A FURY

Tear the veil!—

ANOTHER FURY

It is torn!

CHORUS

540 The pale stars of the morn  
Shine on a misery dire to be borne.  
Dost thou faint, mighty Titan? We laugh thee to  
scorn.  
Dost thou boast the clear knowledge thou waken'dst  
for man?  
Then was kindled within him a thirst which outran  
Those perishing waters: a thirst of fierce fever,  
545 Hope, love, doubt, desire—which consume him  
forever.  
One◌ came forth, of gentle worth,  
Smiling on the sanguine earth;

His words outlived him, like swift poison  
    Withering up truth, peace and pity.  
Look! where round the wide horizon  
550      Many a million-peopled city  
    Vomits smoke in the bright air.—  
    Hark that outcry of despair!  
    'Tis his mild and gentle ghost  
    Wailing for the faith he kindled.  
555      Look again,—the flames almost  
    To a glow-worm's lamp have dwindled:  
    The survivors round the embers  
    Gather in dread.  
    Joy, Joy, Joy!  
560      Past ages crowd on thee, but each one remembers,  
    And the future is dark, and the present is spread  
    Like a pillow of thorns for thy slumberless head.

SEMICHORUS I

Drops of bloody agony flow  
From his white and quivering brow.  
565      Grant a little respite now—  
    See! a disenchanting Nation<sup>2</sup>  
    Springs like day from desolation;  
    To truth its state, is dedicate,  
And Freedom leads it forth, her mate;  
570      A legions band of linked brothers  
    Whom Love calls children—

SEMICHORUS II

    'Tis another's—  
See how kindred murder kin!  
'Tis the vintage-time for Death and Sin:  
Blood, like new wine, bubbles within  
575      Till Despair smothers  
The struggling World—which slaves and tyrants win.

[ *All the Furies vanish,*  
*except one.*]

IONE

580 Hark, sister! what a low yet dreadful groan  
Quite unsuppressed is tearing up the heart  
Of the good Titan—as storms tear the deep  
And beasts hear the Sea moan in inland caves.  
Darest thou observe how the fiends torture him?

PANTHEA

Alas, I looked forth twice, but will no more.

IONE

What didst thou see?

PANTHEA

585 A woeful sight—a youth<sup>o</sup>  
With patient looks nailed to a crucifix.

IONE

What next?

PANTHEA

590 The Heaven around, the Earth below  
Was peopled with thick shapes of human death,  
All horrible, and wrought by human hands,  
And some appeared the work of human hearts,  
For men were slowly killed by frowns and smiles:  
And other sights too foul to speak and live  
Were wandering by. Let us not tempt worse fear  
By looking forth—those groans are grief enough.

595 FURY Behold, an emblem—those who do endure  
Deep wrongs for man, and scorn and chains, but  
heap  
Thousand-fold torment on themselves and him.

PROMETHEUS    Remit the anguish of that lighted stare

—

Close those wan lips—let that thorn-wounded  
brow

Stream not with blood—it mingles with thy tears!

600    Fix, fix those tortured orbs in peace and death

So thy sick throes shake not that crucifix,

So those pale fingers play not with thy gore.—

O horrible! Thy name I will not speak,

It hath become a curse.<sup>3</sup> I see, I see

605    The wise, the mild, the lofty and the just,

Whom thy slaves hate for being like to thee,

Some hunted by foul lies from their heart's home,

An early-chosen, late-lamented home,

As hooded ounces<sup>4</sup> cling to the driven hind,<sup>o</sup>

610    Some linked to corpses in unwholesome cells:

Some—hear I not the multitude laugh loud?—

Impaled in lingering fire: and mighty realms

Float by my feet like sea-uprooted isles

Whose sons are kneaded down in common blood

By the red light of their own burning homes.

615    FURY    Blood thou canst see, and fire; and canst hear  
groans;

Worse things, unheard, unseen, remain behind.

PROMETHEUS    Worse?

FURY                In each human heart terror survives

The ravin it has gorged:<sup>5</sup> the loftiest fear

620    All that they would disdain to think were true:

Hypocrisy and custom make their minds

The fanes<sup>o</sup> of many a worship, now outworn.

They dare not devise good for man's estate

And yet they know not that they do not dare.

625    The good want power, but to weep barren tears.<sup>6</sup>

The powerful goodness want: worse need for  
them.

The wise want love, and those who love want  
 wisdom;  
 And all best things are thus confused to ill.  
 Many are strong and rich,—and would be just,—  
 But live among their suffering fellow men  
 630 As if none felt: they know not what they do.<sup>7</sup>

PROMETHEUS Thy words are like a cloud of winged  
 snakes  
 And yet, I pity those they torture not.

FURY Thou pitiest them? I speak no more!  
 [*Vanishes.*]

PROMETHEUS Ah woe!  
 Ah woe! Alas! pain, pain ever, forever!  
 635 I close my tearless eyes, but see more clear  
 Thy works within my woe-illumed mind,  
 Thou subtle Tyrant!<sup>8</sup> . . . Peace is in the grave—  
 The grave hides all things beautiful and good—  
 I am a God and cannot find it there,  
 640 Nor would I seek it: for, though dread revenge,  
 This is defeat, fierce King, not victory.  
 The sights with which thou torturest gird my soul  
 With new endurance, till the hour arrives  
 When they shall be no types of things which are.

645 PANTHEA Alas! what sawest thou?

PROMETHEUS There are two  
 woes:  
 To speak and to behold; thou spare me one.<sup>9</sup>  
 Names are there, Nature's sacred watchwords—  
 they  
 Were borne aloft in bright emblazonry.<sup>1</sup>  
 The nations thronged around, and cried aloud  
 650 As with one voice, "Truth, liberty and love!"  
 Suddenly fierce confusion fell from Heaven  
 Among them—there was strife, deceit and fear;  
 Tyrants rushed in, and did divide the spoil.

655        This was the shadow of the truth I saw.  
THE EARTH    I felt thy torture, Son, with such mixed  
             joy  
             As pain and Virtue give.—To cheer thy state  
             I bid ascend those subtle and fair spirits  
             Whose homes are the dim caves of human  
             thought  
660        And who inhabit, as birds wing the wind,  
             Its world-surrounding ether;<sup>2</sup> they behold  
             Beyond that twilight realm, as in a glass,<sup>o</sup>  
             The future—may they speak comfort to thee!

PANTHEA

665        Look, Sister, where a troop of spirits gather  
             Like flocks of clouds in spring's delightful weather,  
             Thronging in the blue air!

IONE

             And see! more come  
             Like fountain-vapours when the winds are dumb,  
             That climb up the ravine in scattered lines.  
             And hark! is it the music of the pines?  
670        Is it the lake? is it the waterfall?

PANTHEA

'Tis something sadder, sweeter far than all.

CHORUS OF SPIRITS<sup>3</sup>

675        From unremembered ages we  
             Gentle guides and guardians be  
             Of Heaven-oppressed mortality—  
             And we breathe, and sicken not,  
             The atmosphere of human thought:  
             Be it dim and dank and grey  
             Like a storm-extinguished day  
             Travelled o'er by dying gleams;

680 Be it bright as all between  
Cloudless skies and windless streams,  
Silent, liquid and serene—  
As the birds within the wind,  
As the fish within the wave,  
685 As the thoughts of man's own mind  
Float through all above the grave,  
We make there, our liquid lair,  
Voyaging cloudlike and unpent<sup>o</sup>  
Through the boundless element—  
690 Thence we bear the prophecy  
Which begins and ends in thee!

IONE

More yet come, one by one: the air around them  
Looks radiant as the air around a star.

FIRST SPIRIT

On a battle-trumpet's blast  
I fled hither, fast, fast, fast,  
695 Mid the darkness upward cast—  
From the dust of creeds outworn,  
From the tyrant's banner torn,  
Gathering round me, onward borne,  
There was mingled many a cry—  
700 Freedom! Hope! Death! Victory!  
Till they faded through the sky  
And one sound—above, around,  
One sound beneath, around, above,  
Was moving; 'twas the soul of love;  
705 'Twas the hope, the prophecy,  
Which begins and ends in thee.

SECOND SPIRIT

A rainbow's arch stood on the sea,  
Which rocked beneath, immoveably;

710 And the triumphant Storm did flee,  
Like a conqueror swift and proud  
Between, with many a captive cloud  
A shapeless, dark and rapid crowd,  
Each by lightning riven in half.—  
715 I heard the thunder hoarsely laugh.—  
Mighty fleets were strewn like chaff  
And spread beneath, a hell of death  
O'er the white waters. I alit  
On a great ship lightning-split  
720 And speeded hither on the sigh  
Of one who gave an enemy  
His plank—then plunged aside to die.

THIRD SPIRIT

I sate beside a sage's bed  
And the lamp was burning red  
Near the book where he had fed,  
725 When a Dream with plumes of flame  
To his pillow hovering came,  
And I knew it was the same  
Which had kindled long ago  
Pity, eloquence and woe;  
730 And the world awhile below  
Wore the shade its lustre made.  
It has borne me here as fleet  
As Desire's lightning feet:  
I must ride it back ere morrow,  
735 Or the sage will wake in sorrow.

FOURTH SPIRIT

On a Poet's lips I slept  
Dreaming like a love-adept  
In the sound his breathing kept;  
Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses  
740 But feeds on the aerial kisses



Of shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses.  
He will watch from dawn to gloom  
The lake-reflected sun illumine  
The yellow bees i' the ivy-bloom  
745 Nor heed nor see, what things they be;  
But from these create he can  
Forms more real than living man,  
Nurslings<sup>o</sup> of immortality!—  
One of these awakened me  
750 And I sped to succour thee.

IONE

Behold'st thou not two shapes from the East and  
West  
Come, as two doves to one beloved nest,  
Twin nurslings of the all-sustaining air,  
On swift still wings glide down the atmosphere?  
755 And hark! their sweet, sad voices! 'tis despair  
Mingled with love, and then dissolved in sound.—

PANTHEA

Canst thou speak, sister? all my words are drowned.

IONE

Their beauty gives me voice. See how they float  
On their sustaining wings of skiey grain,  
760 Orange and azure, deepening into gold:  
Their soft smiles light the air like a star's fire.

CHORUS OF SPIRITS

Hast thou beheld the form of Love?

FIFTH SPIRIT

As over wide dominions  
I sped, like some swift cloud that wings the wide  
air's wildernesses.

765 That planet-crested Shape swept by on lightning-  
braided pinions,<sup>o</sup>  
Scattering the liquid joy of life from his ambrosial<sup>o</sup>  
tresses:  
His footsteps paved the world with light—but as I  
past 'twas fading  
And hollow Ruin yawned behind. Great Sages  
bound in madness  
And headless patriots and pale youths who perished  
unupbraiding,<sup>4</sup>  
770 Gleamed in the Night I wandered o'er—till thou, O  
King of sadness,  
Turned by thy smile the worst I saw to recollected  
gladness.

SIXTH SPIRIT

Ah, sister! Desolation is a delicate thing:  
It walks not on the Earth, it floats not on the air,  
But treads with silent footstep, and fans with silent  
wing  
775 The tender hopes which in their hearts the best and  
gentlest bear,  
Who, soothed to false repose by the fanning plumes  
above  
And the music-stirring motion of its soft and busy  
feet,  
Dreams visions of aerial joy, and call the monster,  
Love,  
And wake, and find the shadow Pain—as he whom  
now we greet.

CHORUS

780 Though Ruin now Love's shadow be,  
Following him destroyingly  
On Death's white and winged steed,  
Which the fleetest cannot flee—

785                   Trampling down both flower and weed,  
Man and beast and foul and fair,  
Like a tempest through the air;  
Thou shalt quell this Horseman grim,  
Woundless though in heart or limb.—

PROMETHEUS

Spirits! how know ye this shall be?

CHORUS

790                   In the atmosphere we breathe—  
As buds grow red when snow-storms flee  
From spring gathering up beneath,  
Whose mild winds shake, the elder brake—  
And the wandering herdsmen know  
795                   That the white-thorn soon will blow—  
Wisdom, Justice, Love and Peace,  
When they struggle to increase,  
Are to us as soft winds be  
To shepherd-boys—the prophecy  
800                   Which begins and ends in thee.

IONE

Where are the Spirits fled?

PANTHEA

                  Only a sense  
Remains of them, like the Omnipotence  
Of music when the inspired voice and lute  
Languish, ere yet the responses are mute  
805                   Which through the deep and labyrinthine soul,  
Like echoes through long caverns, wind and roll.

PROMETHEUS

How fair these air-born shapes! and yet I feel  
Most vain all hope but love, and thou art far,

Asia! who when my being overflowed  
Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine  
810 Which else had sunk into the thirsty dust.  
All things are still—alas! how heavily  
This quiet morning weighs upon my heart;  
Though I should dream, I could even sleep with grief  
If slumber were denied not . . . I would fain  
815 Be what it is my destiny to be,  
The saviour and the strength of suffering man,  
Or sink into the original gulph of things. . . .  
There is no agony and no solace left;  
820 Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.

PANTHEA

Hast thou forgotten one who watches thee  
The cold dark night, and never sleeps but when  
The shadow of thy spirit falls on her?

PROMETHEUS

I said all hope was vain but love—thou lovest . . .

PANTHEA

825 Deeply in truth—but the Eastern star looks white,  
And Asia waits in that far Indian vale,  
The scene of her sad exile—rugged once  
And desolate and frozen like this ravine;  
But now invested with fair flowers and herbs  
And haunted by sweet airs and sounds, which flow  
830 Among the woods and waters, from the ether<sup>o</sup>  
Of her transforming presence—which would fade  
If it were mingled not with thine.—Farewell!

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Ione, Panthea, and Asia (introduced in the following scene) are sisters and Oceanids, that is, daughters of

Oceanus.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Supernatural beings, intermediaries between gods and mortals.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Demogorgon (see 2.4). Prometheus is addressing Jupiter.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Large sacrificial offerings.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, you would have been all-powerful, if I had deigned.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The vulture, tearing daily at Prometheus's heart, was kissed by Jupiter by way of reward.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Hours were represented in Greek myth and art by human figures with wings.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: One of a number of implied parallels between the agony of Prometheus and the passion of Christ.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: At this early point occurs the crisis of the action: the beginning of Prometheus's change of heart from hate to compassion, consummated in lines 303–05.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, remember. But the word's alternative sense, "revoke," will later become crucial.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Let my words not lose their power now.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Through frosty vapors.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Zoroaster founded in ancient Persia a dualistic religion that worshiped fire and light in opposition to the evil principle of darkness. Priests of the religion were called Magi (singular: Magus).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In a note to the name in a poem published in 1817, Thomas Love Peacock alludes to Milton's mention of Demogorgon ( *Paradise Lost* 2.965) and explains: "He was the Genius of the Earth, and the Sovereign Power of the Terrestrial Dæmons. He dwelt originally with Eternity and Chaos, till, becoming weary of inaction, he organised the chaotic elements, and surrounded the earth with the heavens. In addition to Pan and the Fates, his children were Uranus, Titæa, Pytho, Eris, and Erebus." Thus, in Peacock's account, Demogorgon is the father

of the Sky, the Earth, and the Underworld, as well as the Fates.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: The shade or simulacrum of Jupiter.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Typhon, a hundred-headed giant, imprisoned beneath volcanic Mount Aetna. Hades (Pluto), king of the underworld.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Shelley uses the comma in the middle of lines like these to emphasize the internal rhymes.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Like the poisoned shirt of the centaur Nessus, which consumed Hercules' flesh when he put it on. The next two lines allude to the mock crowning of Christ with a crown of thorns.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Stained blood color.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Mercury carries a caduceus, a staff encircled by two snakes with their heads facing each other, a symbol of peace befitting the role of Hermes/Mercury as the messenger of the gods.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Locks of hair resembling the many-headed snake, the hydra.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, the Furies, avengers of crimes committed against the gods.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Gorgons were three mythical personages, with snakes for hair, who turned beholders into stone. Geryon was a monster with three heads and three bodies.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The Chimera, a fabled fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology with three heads (lion, goat, and dragon), the body of a lion and a goat, and a dragon's tail.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Sphinx, a monster with the body of a lion, wings, and the face and breasts of a woman, besieged Thebes by devouring those who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus solved the riddle (causing the Sphinx to kill herself), only to marry his mother ("unnatural love"), leading to the tragic events depicted in the Greek Theban plays.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: That is, the sword of Damocles, suspended by a single hair above the throne of Damocles, ruler of Syracuse in Sicily.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Time of retribution.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The end or conclusion.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Usually identified as France, breaking the spell of monarchy at the time of the Revolution.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, the name "Christ" has become, literally, a curse word, and metaphorically, a curse to humankind, in that His religion of love is used to justify religious wars and bloody oppression.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Cheetahs, or leopards, used in hunting (hoods were sometimes placed over their eyes to make them easier to control).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The prey that it has greedily devoured.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, the good lack ("want") power except to weep "barren tears."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Fury ironically echoes Christ's plea for forgiveness of his crucifiers: "Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Jupiter (also addressed as "fierce King," line 642).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, spare me the woe of speaking (about what I have beheld).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: As in a brilliant display of banners.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A medium, weightless and infinitely elastic, once supposed to permeate the universe.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Identified by Earth at lines 658–63.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Without uttering reproaches.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *blinded*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *always*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vegetation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drags*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Earth*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cruel*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *awe-inspiring*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *call down*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Mercury*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *awe-inspiring*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *artful*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *populate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *temple*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *cowers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *apparitions*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *clasping*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *festive*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mock*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *consider*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chariot*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *carried*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Christ*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Christ*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *doe*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *temples*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mirror*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unconfined*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *children*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *wings*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *heavenly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *thicket*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *blossom*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *purser air*[Return to reference](#) °



**From *Act 2***

SCENE 4—*The Cave of* DEMOGORGON. ASIA *and* PANTHEA.<sup>1</sup>

PANTHEA What veiled form sits on that ebon throne?

ASIA The veil has fallen! . . .

PANTHEA I see a mighty Darkness  
Filling the seat of power; and rays of gloom  
Dart round, as light from the meridian Sun,  
Ungazed upon and shapeless—neither limb  
5 Nor form—nor outline;<sup>2</sup> yet we feel it is  
A living Spirit.

DEMOGORGON Ask what thou wouldst know.

ASIA What canst thou tell?

DEMOGORGON All things thou dar'st  
demand.

ASIA Who made the living world?

DEMOGORGON God.

ASIA Who made all  
10 That it contains—thought, passion, reason, will,  
Imagination?

DEMOGORGON God, Almighty God.

ASIA Who made that sense<sup>3</sup> which, when the winds  
of Spring  
In rarest visitation, or the voice  
Of one beloved heard in youth alone,  
Fills the faint eyes with falling tears, which dim  
15 The radiant looks of unbewailing flowers,  
And leaves this peopled earth a solitude  
When it returns no more?

DEMOGORGON Merciful God.

ASIA And who made terror, madness, crime,  
remorse,  
20 Which from the links of the great chain of things  
To every thought within the mind of man  
Sway and drag heavily—and each one reels

25 Under the load towards the pit of death;  
Abandoned hope, and love that turns to hate;  
And self-contempt, bitterer to drink than blood;  
Pain whose unheeded and familiar speech  
Is howling and keen shrieks, day after day;  
And Hell, or the sharp fear of Hell?<sup>4</sup>

DEMOGORGON                      He reigns.

He reigns.

ASIA Utter his name—a world pining in pain  
Asks but his name; curses shall drag him down.

30

He reigns.

ASIA I feel, I know it—who?

I feel, I know it—who?

DEMOGORGON                      He reigns.

He reigns.

## ASIA Who reigns? There was the Heaven and Earth at first

And Light and Love;—then Saturn,<sup>5</sup> from whose throne

35      Time fell, an envious shadow; such the state  
Of the earth's primal spirits beneath his sway  
As the calm joy of flowers and living leaves  
Before the wind or sun has withered them  
And semivital worms; but he refused

The birthright of their being, knowledge, power,  
 The skill which wields the elements, the thought  
 Which pierces this dim Universe like light,  
 Self-empire and the majesty of love,  
 For thirst of which they fainted. Then Prometheus  
 Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter  
 And with this law alone: "Let man be free,"  
 Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven.  
 To know nor faith nor love nor law, to be  
 Omnipotent but friendless, is to reign;  
 And Jove now reigned; for on the race of man  
 First famine, and then toil, and then disease,  
 Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,  
 Fell; and the unseasonable seasons drove,

45

50

With alternating shafts of frost and fire,  
Their shelterless, pale tribes to mountain caves;  
And in their desert<sup>o</sup> hearts fierce wants he sent  
55 And mad disquietudes, and shadows idle  
Of unreal good, which levied mutual war,  
So ruining the lair wherein they raged.  
Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes  
Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,  
60 Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth,<sup>6</sup> fadeless blooms;  
That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings  
The shape of Death; and Love he sent to bind  
The disunited tendrils of that vine  
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart;  
65 And he tamed fire which, like some beast of prey,  
Most terrible, but lovely, played beneath  
The frown of man, and tortured to his will  
Iron and gold, the slaves and signs of power,  
And gems and poisons, and all subtlest forms,  
70 Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves.  
He gave man speech, and speech created thought,  
Which is the measure of the Universe;  
And Science struck the thrones of Earth and  
Heaven  
75 Which shook, but fell not; and the harmonious  
mind  
Poured itself forth in all-prophetic song,  
And music lifted up the listening spirit  
Until it walked, exempt from mortal care,  
Godlike, o'er the clear billows of sweet sound;  
And human hands first mimicked and then  
80 mocked<sup>7</sup>  
With moulded limbs more lovely than its own  
The human form, till marble grew divine,  
And mothers, gazing, drank the love men see  
Reflected in their race, behold, and perish.<sup>8</sup>—

85       He told the hidden power of herbs and springs,  
           And Disease drank and slept—Death grew like  
           sleep.—  
           He taught the implicated<sup>o</sup> orbits woven  
           Of the wide-wandering stars, and how the Sun  
           Changes his lair, and by what secret spell  
 90       The pale moon is transformed, when her broad  
           eye  
           Gazes not on the interlunar<sup>9</sup> sea;  
           He taught to rule, as life directs the limbs,  
           The tempest-winged chariots of the Ocean,  
           And the Celt knew the Indian.<sup>1</sup> Cities then  
 95       Were built, and through their snow-like columns  
           flowed  
           The warm winds, and the azure æther shone,  
           And the blue sea and shadowy hills were seen . . .  
           Such the alleviations of his state  
           Prometheus gave to man—for which he hangs  
 100       Withering in destined pain—but who rains down  
           Evil, the immedicable plague, which while  
           Man looks on his creation like a God  
           And sees that it is glorious, drives him on,  
           The wreck of his own will, the scorn of Earth,  
 105       The outcast, the abandoned, the alone?—  
           Not Jove: while yet his frown shook Heaven, aye  
           when  
           His adversary from adamantin<sup>o</sup>e chains  
           Cursed him, he trembled like a slave. Declare  
           Who is his master? Is he too a slave?  
 110       DEMOGORGON   All spirits are enslaved which serve  
           things evil:  
           Thou knowest if Jupiter be such or no.  
           ASIA   Whom calledst thou God?  
           DEMOGORGON                   I spoke but as ye speak—  
           For Jove is the supreme of living things.

ASIA Who is the master of the slave?  
 DEMOGORGON —If the Abyss  
 115 Could vomit forth its secrets:—but a voice  
 Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;  
 For what would it avail to bid thee gaze  
 On the revolving world? what to bid speak  
 Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To  
 these  
 All things are subject but eternal Love.  
 120 ASIA So much I asked before, and my heart gave  
 The response thou hast given; and of such truths  
 Each to itself must be the oracle.—  
 One more demand . . . and do thou answer me  
 125 As my own soul would answer, did it know  
 That which I ask.—Prometheus shall arise  
 Henceforth the Sun of this rejoicing world:  
 When shall the destined hour arrive?  
 DEMOGORGON Behold!<sup>2</sup>  
 ASIA The rocks are cloven, and through the purple  
 night  
 130 I see Cars drawn by rainbow-winged steeds  
 Which trample the dim winds—in each there  
 stands  
 A wild-eyed charioteer, urging their flight.  
 Some look behind, as fiends pursued them there  
 And yet I see no shapes but the keen stars:  
 135 Others with burning eyes lean forth, and drink  
 With eager lips the wind of their own speed,  
 As if the thing they loved fled on before,  
 And now—even now they clasped it; their bright  
 locks  
 Stream like a comet's flashing hair: they all  
 Sweep onward.—  
 DEMOGORGON These are the immortal Hours  
 140 Of whom thou didst demand.—One waits for thee.

145 ASIA A Spirit with a dreadful countenance  
Checks its dark chariot by the craggy gulph.  
Unlike thy brethren, ghastly charioteer,  
What art thou? whither wouldst thou bear me?  
Speak!

SPIRIT I am the shadow of a destiny  
More dread than is my aspect—ere yon planet  
Has set, the Darkness which ascends with me  
Shall wrap in lasting night Heaven's kingless  
throne.

ASIA What meanest thou?

150 PANTHEA That terrible shadow<sup>3</sup> floats  
Up from its throne, as may the lurid<sup>o</sup> smoke  
Of earthquake-ruined cities o'er the sea.—  
Lo! it ascends the Car . . . the coursers fly  
Terrified; watch its path among the stars  
Blackening the night!

155 ASIA Thus I am answered—strange!  
PANTHEA See, near the verge<sup>o</sup> another chariot stays;  
An ivory shell inlaid with crimson fire  
Which comes and goes within its sculptured rim  
Of delicate strange tracery—the young Spirit  
That guides it, has the dovelike eyes of hope.  
160 How its soft smiles attract the soul!—as light  
Lures winged insects<sup>4</sup> through the lampless air.

SPIRIT  
My coursers are fed with the lightning,  
They drink of the whirlwind's stream  
And when the red morning is brightning  
165 They bathe in the fresh sunbeam;  
They have strength for their swiftness, I deem:  
Then ascend with me, daughter of Ocean.

I desire—and their speed makes night kindle;  
I fear—they outstrip the Typhoon;

170        Ere the cloud piled on Atlas<sup>5</sup> can dwindle  
             We encircle the earth and the moon:  
             We shall rest from long labours at noon:  
             Then ascend with me, daughter of Ocean.

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Act 2 has opened with Asia—the feminine principle and embodiment of love, who was separated from Prometheus at the moment of his fall into divisive hate—in a lovely Indian valley at the first hour of the dawn of the spring season of redemption. Asia and her sister Panthea have been led, by a sweet and irresistible compulsion, first to the portal and then down into the depths of the cave of Demogorgon—the central enigma of Shelley’s poem.  
As the father of all that exists, Demogorgon may represent the ultimate reason for the way things are. As such, Shelley appears to argue, Demogorgon must be a mystery inaccessible to knowledge and must be ignorant of the principle controlling him. In this scene Demogorgon can give only riddling answers to Asia’s questions about the “why” of creation, good, and evil.  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Echoing Milton’s description of Death, *Paradise Lost* 2.666–73.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Presumably the sense by which one is aware of the “unseen Power” that Shelley calls “Intellectual Beauty” (see “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” stanza 2, pp. 784–85, above).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The nouns “hope,” “love,” etc. (lines 24–28) are all objects of the verb “made” (line 19).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In Greek myth Saturn’s reign was the golden age. In Shelley’s version Saturn refused to grant mortals knowledge and science, so that it was an age of ignorant innocence in which



the deepest human needs remained unfulfilled.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: In Greek myth, medicinal drugs and flowers. Asia is describing (lines 59–97) the various sciences and arts given to humans by Prometheus, the culture bringer.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, sculptors first merely reproduced but later improved on and heightened the beauty of the human form, so that the original was inferior to, and hence “mocked” by, the copy.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Expectant mothers looked at the beautiful statues so that their children might, by prenatal influence, be born with the beauty that makes beholders die of love.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The phase between old and new moons, when the moon is invisible.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A reference to the ships in which the Celtic (here, non-Greco-Roman) races of Europe were able to sail to India.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Demogorgon’s answer is a gesture: he points to the approaching chariots (“Cars”).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Demogorgon (the “Darkness” of line 148), who is ascending (lines 150–55) to dethrone Jupiter.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The ancient image of the soul, or *psyche*, was a moth. The chariot described here will carry Asia to a reunion with Prometheus.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A mountain in North Africa that the Greeks regarded as so high that it supported the heavens.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *empty*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *intertwined*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unbreakable*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *red-glaring*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *horizon* [Return to reference °](#)

SCENE 5—*The Car pauses within a Cloud on the Top of a snowy Mountain.*

ASIA, PANTHEA, *and the* SPIRIT OF THE HOUR.

SPIRIT

On the brink of the night and the morning  
My coursers are wont to respire,<sup>6</sup>  
But the Earth has just whispered a warning  
That their flight must be swifter than fire:  
They shall drink the hot speed of desire!

ASIA Thou breathest on their nostrils—but my breath  
Would give them swifter speed.

SPIRIT Alas, it could not.

PANTHEA O Spirit! pause and tell whence is the light  
Which fills the cloud? the sun is yet unrisen.

SPIRIT The sun will rise not until noon.<sup>7</sup>—Apollo  
Is held in Heaven by wonder—and the light  
Which fills this vapour, as the aerial hue  
Of fountain-gazing roses fills the water,  
Flows from thy mighty sister.

PANTHEA Yes, I feel . . .

ASIA What is it with thee, sister? Thou art pale.

PANTHEA How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;  
I feel, but see thee not. I scarce endure  
The radiance of thy beauty.<sup>8</sup> Some good change  
Is working in the elements which suffer  
Thy presence thus unveiled.—The Nereids tell  
That on the day when the clear hyaline<sup>o</sup>  
Was cloven at thy uprise, and thou didst stand  
Within a veined shell,<sup>9</sup> which floated on  
Over the calm floor of the chrystal sea,  
Among the Ægean isles, and by the shores  
Which bear thy name, love, like the atmosphere  
Of the sun's fire filling the living world,  
Burst from thee, and illumined Earth and Heaven  
And the deep ocean and the sunless caves,  
And all that dwells within them; till grief cast  
Eclipse upon the soul from which it came:

Such art thou now, nor is it I alone,  
Thy sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one,  
But the whole world which seeks thy sympathy.  
Hearest thou not sounds i' the air which speak the love  
Of all articulate beings? Feelest thou not  
The inanimate winds enamoured of thee?—List! [*Music.*]

ASIA Thy words are sweeter than aught else but his  
Whose echoes they are—yet all love is sweet,  
Given or returned; common as light is love  
And its familiar voice wearies not ever.

Like the wide Heaven, the all-sustaining air,  
It makes the reptile equal to the God . . .  
They who inspire it most are fortunate  
As I am now; but those who feel it most  
Are happier still, after long sufferings  
As I shall soon become.

PANTHEA List! Spirits speak.

VOICE (*in the air, singing*)<sup>1</sup>

Life of Life! thy lips enkindle  
With their love the breath between them  
And thy smiles before they dwindle  
Make the cold air fire; then screen them  
In those looks where whoso gazes  
Faints, entangled in their mazes.

Child of Light! thy limbs are burning  
Through the vest which seems to hide them  
As the radiant lines of morning  
Through the clouds ere they divide them,  
And this atmosphere divinest  
Shrouds thee wheresoe'er thou shinest.

Fair are others;—none beholds thee  
But thy voice sounds low and tender  
Like the fairest, for it folds thee  
From the sight, that liquid splendour,  
And all feel, yet see thee never  
As I feel now, lost forever!

Lamp of Earth! where'er thou movest  
Its dim shapes are clad with brightness  
And the souls of whom thou lovest  
Walk upon the winds with lightness  
Till they fail, as I am failing,  
Dizzy, lost . . . yet unbewailing!

ASIA

My soul is an enchanted Boat  
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float  
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing,  
And thine doth like an Angel sit  
Beside the helm conducting it  
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.  
It seems to float ever—forever—  
Upon that many winding River  
Between mountains, woods, abysses,  
A Paradise of wildernesses,  
Till like one in slumber bound  
Borne to the Ocean, I float down, around,  
Into a Sea profound, of ever-spreading sound.

Meanwhile thy spirit lifts its pinions<sup>o</sup>  
In Music's most serene dominions,  
Catching the winds that fan that happy Heaven.  
And we sail on, away, afar,  
Without a course—without a star—  
But by the instinct of sweet Music driven  
Till, through Elysian garden islets  
By thee, most beautiful of pilots,  
Where never mortal pinnacle<sup>o</sup> glided,  
The boat of my desire is guided—  
Realms where the air we breathe is Love  
Which in the winds and on the waves doth move,  
Harmonizing this Earth with what we feel above.

We have past Age's icy caves,  
And Manhood's dark and tossing waves

And Youth's smooth ocean, smiling to betray;  
Beyond the glassy gulphs we flee  
Of shadow-peopled Infancy,  
Through Death and Birth to a diviner day,<sup>2</sup>  
A Paradise of vaulted bowers  
Lit by downward-gazing flowers  
And watery paths that wind between  
Wildernesses calm and green,  
Peopled by shapes too bright to see,  
And rest, having beheld—somewhat like thee,  
Which walk upon the sea, and chaunt melodiously!

## Endnotes

- Note 6: Catch their breath.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The time of the reunion of Prometheus and Asia.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: In an earlier scene Panthea had envisioned in a dream the radiant and eternal inner form of Prometheus emerging through his "wound-worn limbs." The corresponding transfiguration of Asia, prepared for by her descent to the underworld to question Demogorgon, now takes place.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The story told by the Nereids (sea nymphs) serves to associate Asia with Aphrodite, goddess of love, emerging (as in Botticelli's painting) from the Mediterranean on a seashell.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The voice attempts to describe, in a dizzying whirl of optical paradoxes, what it feels like to look on the naked essence of love and beauty.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Asia is describing what it feels like to be transfigured—in the image of moving backward in the stream of time, through youth and infancy and birth, in order to die to this life and be born again to a "diviner" existence.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *glassy sea*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wings*[Return to reference °](#)

- °: *small boat* [Return to reference °](#)

**From *Act 3***



SCENE 1—*Heaven, JUPITER on his Throne; THETIS and the other Deities assembled.*

JUPITER    Ye congregated Powers of Heaven who  
share

The glory and the strength of him ye serve,  
Rejoice! henceforth I am omnipotent.

All else had been subdued to me—alone

5    The soul of man, like unextinguished fire,  
Yet burns towards Heaven with fierce reproach  
and doubt

And lamentation and reluctant prayer,  
Hurling up insurrection, which might make  
Our antique empire insecure, though built  
On eldest faith, and Hell's coeval,<sup>1</sup> fear.

10    And though my curses through the pendulous<sup>o</sup> air  
Like snow on herbless peaks, fall flake by flake  
And cling to it<sup>2</sup> —though under my wrath's night  
It climb the crags of life, step after step,  
Which wound it, as ice wounds unsandalled feet,

15    It yet remains supreme o'er misery,  
Aspiring . . . unrepressed; yet soon to fall:  
Even now have I begotten a strange wonder,  
That fatal Child,<sup>3</sup> the terror of the Earth,  
Who waits but till the destined Hour arrive,  
20    Bearing from Demogorgon's vacant throne  
The dreadful might of ever living limbs  
Which clothed that awful spirit unbeheld—  
To redescend, and trample out the spark<sup>4</sup> . . .

25    Pour forth Heaven's wine, Idæan Ganymede,  
And let it fill the dædal<sup>5</sup> cups like fire  
And from the flower-inwoven soil divine  
Ye all triumphant harmonies arise

30 As dew from Earth under the twilight stars;  
Drink! be the nectar circling through your veins  
The soul of joy, ye everliving Gods,  
Till exultation burst in one wide voice  
Like music from Elysian winds.—

And thou  
Ascend beside me, veiled in the light  
Of the desire which makes thee one with me,  
35 Thetis, bright Image of Eternity!—  
When thou didst cry, "Insufferable might!<sup>6</sup>  
God! spare me! I sustain not the quick flames,  
The penetrating presence; all my being,  
Like him whom the Numidian seps<sup>7</sup> did thaw  
40 Into a dew with poison, is dissolved,  
Sinking through its foundations"—even then  
Two mighty spirits, mingling, made a third  
Mightier than either—which unbodied now  
Between us, floats, felt although unbeheld,  
45 Waiting the incarnation, which ascends—  
Hear ye the thunder of the fiery wheels  
Grinding<sup>8</sup> the winds?—from Demogorgon's  
throne.—  
Victory! victory! Feel'st thou not, O World,  
The Earthquake of his chariot thundering up  
50 Olympus?

[ *The Car of the HOUR arrives.* DEMOGORGON  
*descends and moves toward the Throne of*  
JUPITER.]

Awful Shape, what art thou?

Speak!

DEMOGORGON Eternity—demand no direr name.  
Descend, and follow me down the abyss;  
I am thy child,<sup>9</sup> as thou wert Saturn's child,  
Mightier than thee; and we must dwell together  
55 Henceforth in darkness.—Lift thy lightnings not.

The tyranny of Heaven none may retain,  
 Or reassume, or hold succeeding thee . . .  
 Yet if thou wilt—as 'tis the destiny  
 Of trodden worms to writhe till they are dead—  
 60 Put forth thy might.

JUPITER Detested prodigy!  
 Even thus beneath the deep Titanian prisons<sup>1</sup>  
 I trample thee! . . . thou lingerest?  
 Mercy! mercy!  
 No pity—no release, no respite! . . . Oh,  
 That thou wouldst make mine enemy my judge.  
 65 Even where he hangs, seared by my long revenge  
 On Caucasus—he would not doom me thus.—  
 Gentle and just and dreadless, is he not  
 The monarch of the world? what then art thou? . .  
 .  
 No refuge! no appeal— . . .  
 Sink with me then—  
 70 We two will sink in the wide waves of ruin  
 Even as a vulture and a snake outspent  
 Drop, twisted in inextricable fight,<sup>2</sup>  
 Into a shoreless sea.—Let Hell unlock  
 Its mounded Oceans of tempestuous fire,  
 75 And whelm on them<sup>o</sup> into the bottomless void  
 The desolated world and thee and me,  
 The conqueror and the conquered, and the wreck  
 Of that for which they combated.  
 Ai! Ai!<sup>3</sup>  
 80 The elements obey me not . . . I sink . . .  
 Dizzily down—ever, forever, down—  
 And, like a cloud, mine enemy above  
 Darkens my fall with victory!—Ai! Ai!

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Of the same age.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, “the soul of man” (line 5), as also in lines 14 and 16.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The son of Jupiter and Thetis. Jupiter believes that he has begotten a child who will assume the bodily form of the conquered Demogorgon and then return to announce his victory and the defeat of the resistance of Prometheus.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Of Prometheus’s defiance.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Skillfully wrought (from the name of the Greek craftsman Daedalus). Ganymede (line 25) had been seized on Mount Ida by an eagle and carried to heaven to be Jupiter’s cupbearer.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: This description of Jupiter’s rape of Thetis is a grotesque parody of the reunion of Prometheus and Asia.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A serpent of Numidia (North Africa) whose bite was thought to cause putrefaction.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Cutting with a rasping sound.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Ironically, and in a figurative sense: Demogorgon’s function follows from Jupiter’s actions.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: After they overthrew the Titans, Jupiter and the Olympian gods imprisoned them in Tartarus, deep beneath the earth.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The eagle (or vulture) and the snake locked in equal combat—a favorite Shelleyan image (see *Alastor*, lines 227–32, p. 770, above).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Traditional Greek cry of sorrow.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *overhanging*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wash them*[Return to reference °](#)

***From SCENE 4—A Forest. In the Background a Cave.***  
**PROMETHEUS, ASIA, PANTHEA, IONE, *and the* SPIRIT OF THE EARTH. <sup>4</sup>**

\* \* \*

[*The SPIRIT OF THE HOUR enters.*]

PROMETHEUS We feel what thou hast heard and seen  
—yet speak.

SPIRIT OF THE HOUR Soon as the sound had ceased  
whose thunder filled  
The abysses of the sky, and the wide earth,  
There was a change . . . the impalpable thin air  
100 And the all-circling sunlight were transformed  
As if the sense of love dissolved in them  
Had folded itself round the sphered world.  
My vision then grew clear and I could see  
Into the mysteries of the Universe.<sup>5</sup>  
105 Dizzy as with delight I floated down,  
Winnowing the lightsome air with languid plumes,  
My coursers sought their birthplace in the sun  
Where they henceforth will live exempt from toil,  
Pasturing flowers of vegetable fire—  
110 And where my moonlike car will stand within  
A temple, gazed upon by Phidian forms,<sup>6</sup>  
Of thee, and Asia and the Earth, and me  
And you fair nymphs, looking the love we feel,  
In memory of the tidings it has borne,  
115 Beneath a dome fretted with graven flowers,  
Poised on twelve columns of resplendent stone  
And open to the bright and liquid sky.  
Yoked to it by an amphisbænic snake<sup>7</sup>  
The likeness of those winged steeds will mock<sup>8</sup>  
120 The flight from which they find repose.—Alas,  
Whither has wandered now my partial<sup>9</sup> tongue

When all remains untold which ye would hear!—  
As I have said, I floated to the Earth:  
It was, as it is still, the pain of bliss  
125 To move, to breathe, to be; I wandering went  
Among the haunts and dwellings of mankind  
And first was disappointed not to see  
Such mighty change as I had felt within  
Expressed in outward things; but soon I looked,  
130 And behold! thrones were kingless, and men  
walked  
One with the other even as spirits do,  
None fawned, none trampled; hate, disdain or  
fear,  
Self-love or self-contempt on human brows  
No more inscribed, as o'er the gate of hell,  
135 "All hope abandon, ye who enter here";<sup>1</sup>  
None frowned, none trembled, none with eager  
fear  
Gazed on another's eye of cold command  
Until the subject of a tyrant's will  
Became, worse fate, the abject of his own<sup>2</sup>  
140 Which spurred him, like an outspent<sup>o</sup> horse, to  
death.  
None wrought his lips in truth-entangling lines  
Which smiled the lie his tongue disdained to  
speak;  
None with firm sneer trod out in his own heart  
The sparks of love, and hope, till there remained  
145 Those bitter ashes, a soul self-consumed,  
And the wretch crept, a vampire among men,  
Infecting all with his own hideous ill.  
None talked that common, false, cold, hollow talk  
Which makes the heart deny the yes it breathes  
150 Yet question that unmeant hypocrisy  
With such a self-mistrust as has no name.

And women too, frank, beautiful and kind  
As the free Heaven which rains fresh light and dew  
On the wide earth, past: gentle, radiant forms,  
155 From custom's evil taint exempt and pure;  
Speaking the wisdom once they could not think,  
Looking emotions once they feared to feel  
And changed to all which once they dared not be,  
Yet being now, made Earth like Heaven—nor pride  
160 Nor jealousy nor envy nor ill shame,  
The bitterest of those drops of treasured gall,  
Spoilt the sweet taste of the nepenthe,<sup>3</sup> love.

Thrones, altars, judgement-seats and prisons;  
wherein  
And beside which, by wretched men were borne  
165 Sceptres, tiaras, swords and chains, and tomes  
Of reasoned wrong glozed on<sup>o</sup> by ignorance,  
Were like those monstrous and barbaric shapes,  
The ghosts of a no more remembered fame,  
Which from their unworn obelisks<sup>4</sup> look forth  
170 In triumph o'er the palaces and tombs  
Of those who were their conquerors, mouldering  
round.

Those imaged to the pride of Kings and Priests  
A dark yet mighty faith, a power as wide  
As is the world it wasted, and are now  
175 But an astonishment; even so the tools  
And emblems of its last captivity  
Amid the dwellings of the peopled Earth,  
Stand, not o'erthrown, but unregarded now.  
And those foul shapes, abhorred by God and man  
180 —

Which under many a name and many a form  
Strange, savage, ghastly, dark and execrable  
Were Jupiter,<sup>5</sup> the tyrant of the world;

185 And which the nations panic-stricken served  
 With blood, and hearts broken by long hope, and  
 love  
 Dragged to his altars soiled and garlandless  
 And slain amid men's unreclaiming tears,  
 Flattering the thing they feared, which fear was  
 hate—  
 Frown, mouldering fast, o'er their abandoned  
 shrines.  
 190 The painted veil, by those who were, called life,<sup>6</sup>  
 Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,  
 All men believed and hoped, is torn aside—  
 The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
 Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man:  
 195 Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,  
 Exempt from awe, worship, degree,—the King  
 Over himself; just, gentle, wise—but man:  
 Passionless? no—yet free from guilt or pain  
 Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,  
 200 Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,  
 From chance and death and mutability,  
 The clogs of that which else might oversoar  
 The loftiest star of unascended Heaven  
 Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.<sup>7</sup>

1818–19

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 4: After Jupiter's annihilation (described in scene 2), Hercules unbinds Prometheus, who is reunited with Asia and retires to a cave "where we will sit and talk of time and change / . . . ourselves unchanged." In the speech that concludes the act (included here) the Spirit of the Hour describes what happened in the human world when he sounded the apocalyptic trumpet.[Return to reference 4](#)



- Note 5: That is, the Earth's atmosphere clarifies, no longer refracting the sunlight, and so allows the Spirit of the Hour to see what is happening on Earth.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The crescent-shaped ("moonlike") chariot, its apocalyptic mission accomplished, will be frozen to stone and will be surrounded by the sculptured forms of other agents in the drama. Phidias (5th century B.C.E.) was the noblest of Greek sculptors.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A mythical snake with a head at each end; it serves here as a symbolic warning that a reversal of the process is always possible.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: "Imitate" and also, in their immobility, "mock at" the flight they represent.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Biased or, possibly, telling only part of the story.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The inscription over the gate of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* 3.9.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, he was so abjectly enslaved that his own will accorded with the tyrant's will.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A drug (probably opium) that brings forgetfulness of pain and sorrow.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The Egyptian obelisks (tapering shafts of stone), brought to Rome by its conquering armies, included hieroglyphs that—because they were still undeciphered in Shelley's time—seemed "monstrous and barbaric shapes" (line 168).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The "foul shapes" (line 180) were statues of the gods who, whatever their names, were all really manifestations of Jupiter.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, which was thought to be life by humans as they were before their regeneration.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7:  
That is, a dim point in the extreme of empty space. The sense of lines 198–204 is if regenerate man were to be released from all earthly and biological impediments ("clogs"), he would become what even the stars are not—a pure ideal. Shelley's

original draft concluded here, but in autumn 1819 he added a jubilant fourth act. Drawing on the Renaissance court masque, which combined song and dance with spectacular display, this act represents the union of the universe's formerly divided elements. The ritual dances, first of the Hours with the "Spirits of the human mind" and, finally, of the Moon with her paramour the Earth, form a counterpart to the sexual reunion of

[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *exhausted* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *annotated, explained* [Return to reference °](#)

# The Cloud

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,  
From the seas and streams;  
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid  
In their noon-day dreams.  
5 From my wings are shaken the dews that waken  
The sweet buds every one,  
When rocked to rest on their mother's <sup>o</sup> breast,  
As she dances about the Sun.  
I wield the flail<sup>1</sup> of the lashing hail,  
And whiten the green plains under,  
10 And then again I dissolve it in rain,  
And laugh as I pass in thunder.

I sift the snow on the mountains below,  
And their great pines groan aghast;  
And all the night 'tis my pillow white,  
15 While I sleep in the arms of the blast.  
Sublime on the towers of my skiey bowers,  
Lightning my pilot sits;  
In a cavern under is fettered the thunder,  
It struggles and howls at fits;<sup>o</sup>  
20 Over Earth and Ocean, with gentle motion,  
This pilot is guiding me,  
Lured by the love of the genii that move  
In the depths of the purple sea;<sup>2</sup>  
Over the rills, and the crags, and the hills,  
25 Over the lakes and the plains,  
Wherever he dream, under mountain or stream,  
The Spirit he loves remains;  
And I all the while bask in Heaven's blue smile,<sup>3</sup>  
Whilst he is dissolving in rains.

30 The sanguine Sunrise, with his meteor eyes,<sup>4</sup>  
And his burning plumes outspread,<sup>5</sup>  
Leaps on the back of my sailing rack,<sup>6</sup>  
When the morning star shines dead;  
As on the jag of a mountain crag,  
35 Which an earthquake rocks and swings,  
An eagle alit one moment may sit  
In the light of its golden wings.  
And when Sunset may breathe, from the lit Sea  
beneath,  
Its ardours of rest and of love,  
40 And the crimson pall<sup>o</sup> of eve may fall  
From the depth of Heaven above,  
With wings folded I rest, on mine aëry nest,  
As still as a brooding dove.<sup>7</sup>

45 That orb'd maiden with white fire laden  
Whom mortals call the Moon,  
Glides glimmering o'er my fleece-like floor,  
By the midnight breezes strewn;  
And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,  
Which only the angels hear,  
50 May have broken the woof,<sup>o</sup> of my tent's thin roof,  
The stars peep behind her, and peer;  
And I laugh to see them whirl and flee,  
Like a swarm of golden bees,  
When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,  
55 Till the calm rivers, lakes, and seas,  
Like strips of the sky fallen through me on high,  
Are each paved with the moon and these.<sup>8</sup>

I bind the Sun's throne with a burning zone<sup>o</sup>  
And the Moon's with a girdle of pearl;  
60 The volcanos are dim and the stars reel and swim

When the whirlwinds my banner unfurl.  
 From cape to cape, with a bridge-like shape,  
 Over a torrent sea,  
 Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof—  
 65     The mountains its columns be!  
 The triumphal arch, through which I march  
 With hurricane, fire, and snow,  
 When the Powers of the Air, are chained to my chair,  
 °  
 70     Is the million-coloured Bow;  
 The sphere-fire° above its soft colours wove  
 While the moist Earth was laughing below.

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,  
 And the nursling of the Sky;  
 I pass through the pores, of the ocean and shores;  
 75     I change, but I cannot die—  
 For after the rain, when with never a stain  
 The pavilion of Heaven is bare,  
 And the winds and sunbeams, with their convex  
 gleams,  
 80     Build up the blue dome of Air<sup>9</sup>—  
 I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,<sup>1</sup>  
 And out of the caverns of rain,  
 Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the  
 tomb,  
 I arise, and unbuild it again.—

1820

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Either a weapon fashioned as a ball and chain or a tool for threshing grain.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, atmospheric electricity, guiding the cloud (line 18), discharges as lightning when “lured” by the attraction of an opposite charge.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: The upper part of the cloud remains exposed to the sun.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: As bright as a burning meteor.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The sun's corona. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: High, broken clouds, driven by the wind.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: An echo of Milton's description of his Muse, identified with the Holy Spirit, who "with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss" (*Paradise Lost* 1.20–21).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The stars reflected in the water.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The blue color of the sky. The phenomenon, as Shelley indicates, results from the way "sunbeams" are filtered by the Earth's atmosphere.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The memorial monument of the dead cloud is the cloudless blue dome of the sky. (The point is that a cenotaph is a monument that does not contain a corpse.)[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *Earth's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fitfully*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rich coverlet*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *texture*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *belt, sash*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *chariot*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sunlight*[Return to reference °](#)

## To a Sky-Lark<sup>1</sup>

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
Bird thou never wert—  
That from Heaven, or near it,  
Pourest thy full heart  
5 In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher  
From the earth thou springest  
Like a cloud of fire;  
The blue deep thou wingest,  
10 And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden lightning  
Of the sunken Sun—  
O'er which clouds are brightning,  
Thou dost float and run;  
15 Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even<sup>o</sup>  
Melts around thy flight,  
Like a star of Heaven  
In the broad day-light  
20 Thou art unseen,—but yet I hear thy shrill delight,

Keen as are the arrows  
Of that silver sphere,<sup>2</sup>  
Whose intense lamp narrows  
In the white dawn clear  
25 Until we hardly see—we feel that it is there.

All the earth and air

30           With thy voice is loud,  
          As when Night is bare  
          From one lonely cloud  
The moon rains out her beams—and Heaven is  
          overflowed.

          What thou art we know not;  
          What is most like thee?  
          From rainbow clouds there flow not  
          Drops so bright to see  
35   As from thy presence showers a rain of melody.

          Like a Poet hidden  
          In the light of thought,  
          Singing hymns unbidden,  
          Till the world is wrought  
40   To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

          Like a high-born maiden  
          In a palace-tower,  
          Soothing her love-laden  
          Soul in secret hour,  
45   With music sweet as love—which overflows her  
          bower:

          Like a glow-worm golden  
          In a dell of dew,  
          Scattering unbeholden  
          Its aerial hue  
50   Among the flowers and grass which screen it from  
          the view:

          Like a rose embowered  
          In its own green leaves—  
          By warm winds deflowered—  
          Till the scent, it gives



55 Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-  
winged thieves:<sup>3</sup>

Sound of vernal<sup>o</sup> showers  
On the twinkling grass,  
Rain-awakened flowers,  
All that ever was  
60 Joyous, and clear and fresh, thy music doth surpass.

Teach us, Sprite<sup>o</sup> or Bird,  
What sweet thoughts are thine;  
I have never heard  
Praise of love or wine  
65 That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine:

Chorus Hymeneal<sup>4</sup>  
Or triumphal chaunt  
Matched with thine would be all  
But an empty vaunt,  
70 A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains  
Of thy happy strain?  
What fields or waves or mountains?  
What shapes of sky or plain?  
75 What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of  
pain?

With thy clear keen joyance  
Languor cannot be—  
Shadow of annoyance  
Never came near thee;  
80 Thou lovest—but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,  
Thou of death must deem

Things more true and deep  
 Than we mortals dream,  
 Or how could thy notes flow in such a chrystal  
 85 stream?

We look before and after,  
 And pine for what is not—  
 Our sincerest laughter  
 With some pain is fraught—  
 90 Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest  
 thought.

Yet if we could scorn  
 Hate and pride and fear;  
 If we were things born  
 Not to shed a tear,  
 95 I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures  
 Of delightful sound—  
 Better than all treasures  
 That in books are found—  
 100 Thy skill to poet were, thou Scornor of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness  
 That thy brain must know,  
 Such harmonious madness  
 From my lips would flow  
 105 The world should listen then—as I am listening now.

1820 1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The European skylark is a small bird that sings only in flight, often when it is too high to be visible. [Return to reference](#)

1

- Note 2: The morning star, Venus.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The “warm winds,” line 53.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Marital (from Hymen, Greek god of marriage).[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *evening*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *springtime*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *spirit*[Return to reference °](#)

# To Night

Swiftly walk o'er the western wave,  
    Spirit of Night!  
Out of the misty eastern cave  
Where, all the long and lone daylight  
Thou wovest dreams of joy and fear,  
5      Which make thee terrible and dear,  
        Swift be thy flight!

Wrap thy form in a mantle grey,  
    Star-inwrought!  
Blind with thine hair the eyes of day,  
10      Kiss her until she be wearied out—  
Then wander o'er City and sea and land,  
Touching all with thine opiate wand—  
        Come, long-sought!

When I arose and saw the dawn  
15      I sighed for thee;  
When Light rode high, and the dew was gone,  
And noon lay heavy on flower and tree,  
And the weary Day<sup>1</sup> turned to his rest,  
Lingering like an unloved guest,  
20      I sighed for thee.

Thy brother Death came, and cried,  
    Wouldst thou me?  
Thy sweet child Sleep, the filmy-eyed,  
Murmured like a noontide bee,  
25      Shall I nestle near thy side?  
Wouldst thou me? and I replied,  
        No, not thee!



## To ——[Music, when soft voices die]<sup>1</sup>

Music, when soft voices die,  
Vibrates in the memory.—  
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,  
Live within the sense they quicken.<sup>o</sup>—

5      Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,  
Are heaped for the beloved's bed<sup>2</sup>—  
And so thy thoughts,<sup>3</sup> when thou art gone,  
Love itself shall slumber on.

1821

1824

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This poem was first published under the title "Memory" in Mary Shelley's edition of her husband's *Posthumous Poems* in 1824, with the two stanzas in the reverse order from what we give here. Our text is based on a version found in a notebook of Percy Shelley's now housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The square brackets in line 8 mark blank spaces left unfilled in the manuscript.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The bed of the dead rose.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, my thoughts of thee.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *enliven*[Return to reference °](#)

## O World, O Life, O Time

O World, O Life, O Time,  
On whose last steps I climb,  
Trembling at that where I had stood before,  
When will return the glory of your prime?  
No more, O never more!

5

Out of the day and night  
A joy has taken flight—  
Fresh spring and summer [     ] and winter hoar  
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight  
No more, O never more!

10

1824

## ***Chorus from Hellas***<sup>[1](#)</sup>

### **Endnotes**

- Note 1: *Hellas*, a closet drama written in the autumn of 1821, was inspired by the Greek war for independence from the Ottoman Empire. ("Hellas" is another name for Greece.) In his preface Shelley declared that he viewed this revolution as foretelling the final overthrow of all tyranny. The choruses throughout are sung by enslaved Greek women. We give the chorus that concludes the drama. [Return to reference 1](#)



## ***The world's great age<sup>2</sup>***

The world's great age begins anew,  
The golden years<sup>3</sup> return,  
The earth doth like a snake renew  
Her winter weeds<sup>4</sup> outworn;  
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam  
5 Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

A brighter Hellas rears its mountains  
From waves serener far,  
A new Peneus<sup>5</sup> rolls his fountains  
Against the morning-star,  
10 Where fairer Tempes bloom, there sleep  
Young Cyclads<sup>6</sup> on a sunnier deep.

A loftier Argo<sup>7</sup> cleaves the main,  
Fraught with a later prize;  
Another Orpheus<sup>8</sup> sings again,  
15 And loves, and weeps, and dies;  
A new Ulysses leaves once more  
Calypso<sup>9</sup> for his native shore.

O, write no more the tale of Troy,  
If earth Death's scroll must be!  
20 Nor mix with Laian<sup>1</sup> rage the joy  
Which dawns upon the free;  
Although a subtler Sphinx renew  
Riddles of death Thebes never knew.

Another Athens shall arise,  
25 And to remoter time  
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,  
The splendour of its prime,

30 And leave, if nought so bright may live,  
All earth can take or Heaven can give.

Saturn and Love their long repose  
Shall burst, more bright and good  
Than all who fell, than One who rose,  
Than many unsubdued;<sup>2</sup>  
35 Not gold, not blood their altar dowers<sup>o</sup>  
But votive tears and symbol flowers.

O cease! must hate and death return?  
Cease! must men kill and die?  
Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn  
Of bitter prophecy.  
40 The world is weary of the past,  
O might it die or rest at last!

1821

1822

## Endnotes

- Note 2: Prophecies of wars, and rumours of wars, etc., may safely be made by poet or prophet in any age, but to anticipate however darkly a period of regeneration and happiness is a more hazardous exercise of the faculty which bards possess or fain. It will remind the reader . . . of Isaiah and Virgil, whose ardent spirits . . . saw the possible and perhaps approaching state of society in which the "lion shall lie down with the lamb," and "*omnis feret omnia tellus*." Let these great names be my authority and excuse [*Shelley's note*]. The quotations are from Isaiah's millennial prophecy (for example, chaps. 25, 45), and Virgil's prediction, in *Eclogue* 4, of a return of the golden age, when "all the earth will produce all things."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In Greek myth the first period of history, when Saturn reigned.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Clothes (especially mourning garments) as well as dead vegetation.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The river in northeast Greece that flows through the beautiful vale of Tempe (line 11).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The Cyclades, islands in the Aegean Sea.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: On which Jason sailed in his quest for the Golden Fleece.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The legendary player on the lyre who was torn to pieces by the frenzied Thracian women while he was mourning the death of his wife, Eurydice.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The nymph deserted by Ulysses on his voyage back from the Trojan War to his native Ithaca.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: King Laius of Thebes was killed in a quarrel by his son Oedipus, who did not recognize his father. Shortly thereafter Oedipus delivered Thebes from the ravages of the Sphinx by answering its riddle (lines 23–24).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Saturn and Love were among the deities of a real or imaginary state of innocence and happiness. “All” those “who fell” [are] the Gods of Greece, Asia, and Egypt; the “One who rose” [is] Jesus Christ . . . and the “many unsubdued” [are] the monstrous objects of the idolatry of China, India, the Antarctic islands, and the native tribes of America [*Shelley’s note*].[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *gifts*[Return to reference °](#)

**Adonais** John Keats died in Rome on February 23, 1821, and was buried there in the Protestant Cemetery. In the Preface to *Adonais*, his elegy for Keats, Percy Shelley, who had buried his three-year-old son William in that “romantic and lonely cemetery” a year and a half earlier, describes the site as “an open space among the ruins covered in winter with violets and daisies.” “It might make one in love with death,” he adds, “to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.” In fact, after his drowning in 1822, Shelley’s ashes would be interred in that sweet place also.

Shelley had met Keats, had invited him to be his guest at Pisa in Italy (an invitation Keats did not live to accept), and had gradually come to realize that Keats was, as the Preface to *Adonais* states, “among the writers of the highest genius who have adorned our age.” In his elegy, which he began writing in April 1821, almost immediately after hearing of Keats’s death, Shelley mourns Keats, honors him, and also pursues a case against the reviewers of Keats’s poems—in particular the anonymous critic for the influential *Quarterly Review* (now known to be the Tory civil servant John Wilson Croker), who had written a grossly insulting review of Keats’s *Endymion*. Shelley believed, wrongly, that Keats’s disappointment over the review had caused his illness and death: Keats’s “genius,” he stated in the Preface, “was not less delicate and fragile than it was beautiful. . . . The savage criticism . . . produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind.” Shelley’s readiness to believe the exaggerated rumors about Keats’s reaction to his bad reviews is the more understandable when one remembers that he had been savaged by reviewers on several occasions himself. It is also true that in this period of fierce political enmities rancorous book reviews were very near being the norm rather than the exception.

Shelley in a letter described *Adonais* as a “highly wrought piece of art.” Its artistry consists in part in the care with which it follows the conventions of the pastoral elegy, the literary form established more than two thousand years earlier by the Greek poets Bion, Moschus, and Theocritus—Shelley had translated into English Bion’s *Lament for Adonis* and Moschus’s *Lament for Bion*. Those

conventions include an invocation to a muse; descriptions of nature's sympathetic participation in the grieving and of the procession of mourners; and most important, the final turn from despair to consolation in the discovery that, paradoxically, the grave is the gate to a higher existence. The name that Shelley gives to Keats in this pastoral elegy, "Adonais," likely derives from Adonis, the name of the beautiful mortal who was beloved by the goddess Venus. Slain by a wild boar while hunting, Adonis was restored to life and a kind of immortality on the condition that he spend only part of the year with Venus, and the remaining part with Proserpine in the underworld. This cycle of rebirth and death, symbolic of the alternate return of summer and winter, suggests why Adonis was central to ancient fertility myths. This cycle is also an integral element of *Adonais*.

Published first in Pisa in 1821, *Adonais* was not issued in England until 1829, in an edition sponsored by the so-called Cambridge Apostles, a group including the poets Alfred Tennyson and A. H. Hallam. The appearance of this edition marked the beginning of Keats's posthumous emergence from obscurity.

# Adonais

## *An Elegy on the Death of John Keats, Author of Endymion, Hyperion, etc.*

[Thou wert the morning star among the living,  
Ere thy fair light had fled—  
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving  
New splendour to the dead.]<sup>1</sup>

### 1

I weep for Adonais—he is dead!  
O, weep for Adonais! though our tears  
Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!  
And thou, sad Hour,<sup>2</sup> selected from all years  
To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,<sup>o</sup>  
5 And teach them thine own sorrow, say: with me  
Died Adonais; till the Future dares  
Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be  
An echo and a light unto eternity!

### 2

10 Where wert thou mighty Mother,<sup>3</sup> when he lay,  
When thy Son lay, pierced by the shaft which flies  
In darkness?<sup>4</sup> where was lorn<sup>o</sup> Urania  
When Adonais died? With veiled eyes,  
'Mid listening Echoes, in her Paradise  
15 She sate, while one,<sup>5</sup> with soft enamoured breath,  
Rekindled all the fading melodies,  
With which, like flowers that mock the corpse<sup>o</sup> beneath,  
He had adorned and hid the coming bulk of death.

### 3

O, weep for Adonais—he is dead!

20 Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!  
Yet wherefore? Quench within their burning bed  
Thy fiery tears, and let thy loud heart keep  
Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep;  
For he is gone, where all things wise and fair  
Descend;—oh, dream not that the amorous Deep<sup>o</sup>  
25 Will yet restore him to the vital air;  
Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair.

#### 4

Most musical of mourners, weep again!  
Lament anew, Urania!—He<sup>6</sup> died,  
Who was the Sire of an immortal strain,  
30 Blind, old, and lonely, when his country's pride,  
The priest, the slave, and the liberticide,  
Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite  
Of lust and blood; he went, unterrified,  
Into the gulph of death; but his clear Sprite<sup>o</sup>  
35 Yet reigns o'er earth; the third among the sons of light.<sup>7</sup>

#### 5

Most musical of mourners, weep anew!  
Not all to that bright station dared to climb;  
And happier they their happiness who knew,  
Whose tapers<sup>o</sup> yet burn through that night of time  
40 In which suns perished; others more sublime,  
Struck by the envious wrath of man or God,  
Have sunk, extinct in their refulgent<sup>o</sup> prime;  
And some yet live, treading the thorny road,  
Which leads, through toil and hate, to Fame's serene abode.  
45

#### 6

But now, thy youngest, dearest one, has perished—  
The nursling of thy widowhood, who grew,  
Like a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished,  
And fed with true love tears, instead of dew;<sup>8</sup>  
Most musical of mourners, weep anew!

50 Thy extreme<sup>o</sup> hope, the loveliest and the last,  
The bloom, whose petals nipt before they blew<sup>o</sup>  
Died on the promise of the fruit, is waste;  
The broken lily lies—the storm is overpast.

**7**

55 To that high Capital,<sup>o</sup> where kingly Death  
Keeps his pale court in beauty and decay,  
He came; and bought, with price of purest breath,  
A grave among the eternal.—Come away!  
Haste, while the vault of blue Italian day  
60 Is yet his fitting charnel-roof! while still  
He lies, as if in dewy sleep he lay;  
Awake him not! surely he takes his fill  
Of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill.

**8**

65 He will awake no more, oh, never more!—  
Within the twilight chamber spreads apace,  
The shadow of white Death, and at the door  
Invisible Corruption waits to trace  
His extreme way to her dim dwelling-place;  
The eternal Hunger sits, but pity and awe  
70 Soothe her pale rage, nor dares she to deface  
So fair a prey, till darkness, and the law  
Of change, shall o'er his sleep the mortal curtain draw.

**9**

O, weep for Adonais!—The quick<sup>o</sup> Dreams,  
The passion-winged Ministers of thought,  
75 Who were his flocks,<sup>9</sup> whom near the living streams  
Of his young spirit he fed, and whom he taught  
The love which was its music, wander not,—  
Wander no more, from kindling brain to brain,  
But droop there, whence they sprung; and mourn their lot  
80 Round the cold heart, where, after their sweet pain,  
They ne'er will gather strength, or find a home again.



## 10

And one<sup>1</sup> with trembling hands clasps his cold head,  
And fans him with her moonlight wings, and cries;  
"Our love, our hope, our sorrow, is not dead;  
85 See, on the silken fringe of his faint eyes,  
Like dew upon a sleeping flower, there lies  
A tear some Dream has loosened from his brain."  
Lost Angel of a ruined Paradise!  
She knew not 'twas her own; as with no stain  
90 She faded, like a cloud which had outwept its rain.

## 11

One from a lucid<sup>o</sup> urn of starry dew  
Washed his light limbs as if embalming them;  
Another clipt her profuse locks, and threw  
The wreath upon him, like an anadem,<sup>o</sup>  
95 Which frozen tears instead of pearls begem;  
Another in her wilful grief would break  
Her bow and winged reeds,<sup>o</sup> as if to stem  
A greater loss with one which was more weak;  
And dull the barbed fire against his frozen cheek.

## 12

Another Splendour on his mouth alit,  
100 That mouth, whence it was wont<sup>o</sup> to draw the breath  
Which gave it strength to pierce the guarded wit,<sup>2</sup>  
And pass into the panting heart beneath  
With lightning and with music: the damp death  
Quenched its caress upon his icy lips;  
105 And, as a dying meteor stains a wreath  
Of moonlight vapour, which the cold night clips,<sup>o</sup>  
It flushed through his pale limbs, and past to its eclipse.

## 13

And others came . . . Desires and Adorations,  
Winged Persuasions and veiled Destinies,

110 Splendours, and Glooms, and glimmering Incarnations  
Of hopes and fears, and twilight Phantasies;  
And Sorrow, with her family of Sighs,  
And Pleasure, blind with tears, led by the gleam  
115 Of her own dying smile instead of eyes,  
Came in slow pomp;—the moving pomp might seem  
Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream.

#### 14

All he had loved, and moulded into thought,  
From shape, and hue, and odour, and sweet sound,  
Lamented Adonais. Morning sought  
120 Her eastern watchtower, and her hair unbound,  
Wet with the tears which should adorn the ground,  
Dimmed the aerial eyes that kindle day;  
Afar the melancholy thunder moaned,  
Pale Ocean in unquiet slumber lay,  
125 And the wild winds flew round, sobbing in their dismay.

#### 15

Lost Echo sits amid the voiceless mountains,  
And feeds her grief with his remembered lay,<sup>o</sup>  
And will no more reply to winds or fountains,  
Or amorous birds perched on the young green spray,  
130 Or herdsman's horn, or bell at closing day;  
Since she can mimic not his lips, more dear  
Than those for whose disdain she pined away  
Into a shadow of all sounds:<sup>3</sup>—a drear  
135 Murmur, between their songs, is all the woodmen hear.

#### 16

Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down  
Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were,  
Or they dead leaves; since her delight is flown  
For whom should she have waked the sullen year?  
140 To Phoebus was not Hyacinth so dear<sup>4</sup>  
Nor to himself Narcissus, as to both

Thou Adonais: wan they stand and sere<sup>o</sup>  
Amid the faint companions of their youth,  
With dew all turned to tears; odour, to sighing ruth.<sup>o</sup>

### 17

145 Thy spirit's sister, the lorn nightingale<sup>5</sup>  
Mourns not her mate with such melodious pain;  
Not so the eagle, who like thee could scale  
Heaven, and could nourish in the sun's domain  
Her mighty youth with morning,<sup>6</sup> doth complain,<sup>o</sup>  
150 Soaring and screaming round her empty nest,  
As Albion<sup>o</sup> wails for thee: the curse of Cain  
Light on his head<sup>7</sup> who pierced thy innocent breast,  
And scared the angel soul that was its earthly guest!

### 18

Ah woe is me! Winter is come and gone,  
But grief returns with the revolving year;  
155 The airs and streams renew their joyous tone;  
The ants, the bees, the swallows reappear;  
Fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Seasons' bier;  
The amorous birds now pair in every brake,<sup>o</sup>  
And build their mossy homes in field and brere;<sup>o</sup>  
160 And the green lizard, and the golden snake,  
Like unimprisoned flames, out of their trance awake.

### 19

Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean  
A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst  
As it has ever done, with change and motion,  
165 From the great morning of the world when first  
God dawned on Chaos; in its stream immersed  
The lamps of Heaven flash with a softer light;  
All baser things pant with life's sacred thirst;  
Diffuse themselves; and spend in love's delight,  
170 The beauty and the joy of their renewed might.

## 20

The leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender  
Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;  
Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour  
Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death  
175 And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath;  
Nought we know, dies. Shall that alone which knows  
Be as a sword consumed before the sheath<sup>8</sup>  
By sightless<sup>o</sup> lightning?—th' intense atom glows  
180 A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose.

## 21

Alas! that all we loved of him should be,  
But for our grief, as if it had not been,  
And grief itself be mortal! Woe is me!  
Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene  
The actors or spectators? Great and mean<sup>o</sup>  
185 Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.  
As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,  
Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,  
Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to  
sorrow.

## 22

*He* will awake no more, oh, never more!  
190 "Wake thou," cried Misery, "childless Mother, rise  
Out of thy sleep, and slake,<sup>o</sup> in thy heart's core,  
A wound more fierce than his with tears and sighs."  
And all the Dreams that watched Urania's eyes,  
And all the Echoes whom their sister's song<sup>9</sup>  
195 Had held in holy silence, cried: "Arise!"  
Swift as a Thought by the snake Memory stung,  
From her ambrosial rest the fading Splendour<sup>o</sup> sprung.

## 23

She rose like an autumnal Night, that springs

200 Out of the East, and follows wild and drear  
The golden Day, which, on eternal wings,  
Even as a ghost abandoning a bier,  
Had left the Earth a corpse. Sorrow and fear  
So struck, so roused, so rapt Urania;  
205 So saddened round her like an atmosphere  
Of stormy mist; so swept her on her way  
Even to the mournful place where Adonais lay.

## 24

Out of her secret Paradise she sped,  
Through camps and cities rough with stone, and steel,  
210 And human hearts, which to her aery tread  
Yielding not, wounded the invisible  
Palms of her tender feet where'er they fell:  
And barbed tongues, and thoughts more sharp than they  
Rent<sup>o</sup> the soft Form they never could repel,  
215 Whose sacred blood, like the young tears of May,  
Paved with eternal flowers that undeserving way.

## 25

In the death chamber for a moment Death  
Shamed by the presence of that living Might  
Blushed to annihilation, and the breath  
220 Revisited those lips, and life's pale light  
Flashed through those limbs, so late her dear delight.  
"Leave me not wild and drear and comfortless,  
As silent lightning leaves the starless night!  
Leave me not!" cried Urania: her distress  
225 Roused Death: Death rose and smiled, and met her vain  
caress.

## 26

"Stay yet awhile! speak to me once again;  
Kiss me, so long but as a kiss may live;  
And in my heartless<sup>1</sup> breast and burning brain  
That word, that kiss shall all thoughts else survive

230 With food of saddest memory kept alive,  
Now thou art dead, as if it were a part  
Of thee, my Adonais! I would give  
All that I am to be as thou now art!  
But I am chained to Time, and cannot thence depart!

## 27

235 "Oh gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,  
Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men  
Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart  
Dare<sup>o</sup> the unpastured dragon in his den?<sup>2</sup>  
Defenceless as thou wert, oh where was then  
240 Wisdom the mirrored shield, or scorn the spear?<sup>3</sup>  
Or hadst thou waited the full cycle, when  
Thy spirit should have filled its crescent sphere,<sup>4</sup>  
The monsters of life's waste had fled from thee like deer.

## 28

245 "The herded wolves, bold only to pursue;  
The obscene ravens, clamorous o'er the dead;  
The vultures to the conqueror's banner true  
Who feed where Desolation first has fed,  
And whose wings rain contagion;—how they fled,  
When like Apollo, from his golden bow,  
250 The Pythian of the age<sup>5</sup> one arrow sped  
And smiled!—The spoilers tempt no second blow,  
They fawn on the proud feet that spurn them lying low.

## 29

255 "The sun comes forth, and many reptiles spawn;  
He sets, and each ephemeral insect<sup>6</sup> then  
Is gathered into death without a dawn,  
And the immortal stars awake again;  
So is it in the world of living men:  
A godlike mind soars forth, in its delight  
Making earth bare and veiling heaven,<sup>7</sup> and when

260        It sinks, the swarms that dimmed or shared its light  
Leave to its kindred lamps<sup>8</sup> the spirit's awful night."

### 30

Thus ceased she: and the mountain shepherds came,  
Their garlands sere, their magic mantles<sup>o</sup> rent;  
The Pilgrim of Eternity,<sup>9</sup> whose fame  
Over his living head like Heaven is bent,  
265        An early but enduring monument,  
Came, veiling all the lightnings of his song  
In sorrow; from her wilds Ierne sent  
The sweetest lyrist<sup>1</sup> of her saddest wrong,  
270        And love taught grief to fall like music from his tongue.

### 31

Midst others of less note, came one frail Form,<sup>2</sup>  
A phantom among men; companionless  
As the last cloud of an expiring storm  
Whose thunder is its knell;<sup>o</sup> he, as I guess,  
Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness,  
275        Actæon-like, and now he fled astray  
With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness,  
And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,  
Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey.<sup>3</sup>

### 32

280        A pardlike<sup>o</sup> Spirit beautiful and swift—  
A Love in desolation masked;—a Power  
Girt round with weakness;—it can scarce uplift  
The weight of the superincumbent hour;<sup>4</sup>  
It is a dying lamp, a falling shower,  
A breaking billow;—even whilst we speak  
285        Is it not broken? On the withering flower  
The killing sun smiles brightly: on a cheek  
The life can burn in blood, even while the heart may break.

### 33

His head was bound with pansies overblown,  
And faded violets, white, and pied, and blue;  
290 And a light spear topped with a cypress cone,  
Round whose rude shaft dark ivy tresses grew<sup>5</sup>  
Yet dripping with the forest's noonday dew,  
Vibrated, as the ever-beating heart  
Shook the weak hand that grasped it; of that crew  
295 He came the last, neglected and apart;  
A herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter's dart.

### 34

All stood aloof, and at his partial moan  
Smiled through their tears; well knew that gentle band  
Who in another's fate now wept his own;  
300 As in the accents of an unknown land,  
He sung new sorrow; sad Urania scanned  
The Stranger's mien, and murmured: "who art thou?"  
He answered not, but with a sudden hand  
Made bare his branded and ensanguined<sup>o</sup> brow,  
305 Which was like Cain's or Christ's<sup>6</sup>—Oh! that it should be so!

### 35

What softer voice is hushed over the dead?  
Athwart what brow is that dark mantle thrown?  
What form leans sadly o'er the white death-bed,  
In mockery of monumental stone,<sup>7</sup>  
310 The heavy heart heaving without a moan?  
If it be He,<sup>8</sup> who, gentlest of the wise,  
Taught, soothed, loved, honoured the departed one;  
Let me not vex, with inharmonious sighs  
The silence of that heart's accepted sacrifice.  
315

### 36

Our Adonais has drunk poison—oh!  
What deaf and viperous murderer could crown  
Life's early cup with such a draught of woe?  
The nameless worm<sup>9</sup> would now itself disown:



320 It felt, yet could escape the magic tone  
Whose prelude held all envy, hate, and wrong,  
But what was howling in one breast alone,  
Silent with expectation of the song,<sup>1</sup>  
Whose master's hand is cold, whose silver lyre unstrung.

### 37

325 Live thou, whose infamy is not thy fame!  
Live! fear no heavier chastisement from me,  
Thou noteless blot on a remembered name!  
But be thyself, and know thyself to be!  
And ever at thy season be thou free  
To spill the venom when thy fangs o'erflow:  
330 Remorse and Self-contempt shall cling to thee;  
Hot Shame shall burn upon thy secret brow,  
And like a beaten hound tremble thou shalt—as now.

### 38

Nor let us weep that our delight is fled  
Far from these carrion kites<sup>2</sup> that scream below;  
335 He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead;  
Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now.—  
Dust to the dust! but the pure spirit shall flow  
Back to the burning fountain whence it came,  
A portion of the Eternal,<sup>3</sup> which must glow  
340 Through time and change, unquenchably the same,  
Whilst thy cold embers choke the sordid hearth of shame.

### 39

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep—  
He hath awakened from the dream of life—  
'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep  
345 With phantoms an unprofitable strife,  
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife  
Invulnerable nothings.—We decay  
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief  
Convulse us and consume us day by day,

350 And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

**40**

He has outsoared the shadow of our night;<sup>4</sup>  
Envy and calumny<sup>o</sup> and hate and pain,  
And that unrest which men miscall delight,  
355 Can touch him not and torture not again;  
From the contagion of the world's slow stain  
He is secure, and now can never mourn  
A heart grown cold, a head grown grey in vain;  
Nor, when the spirit's self has ceased to burn,  
360 With sparkless ashes load an unlamented urn.

**41**

He lives, he wakes—'tis Death is dead, not he;  
Mourn not for Adonais.—Thou young Dawn  
Turn all thy dew to splendour, for from thee  
The spirit thou lamentest is not gone;  
365 Ye caverns and ye forests, cease to moan!  
Cease ye faint flowers and fountains, and thou Air  
Which like a mourning veil thy scarf hadst thrown  
O'er the abandoned Earth, now leave it bare  
Even to the joyous stars which smile on its despair!<sup>5</sup>

**42**

370 He is made one with Nature: there is heard  
His voice in all her music, from the moan  
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;<sup>6</sup>  
He is a presence to be felt and known  
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,  
375 Spreading itself where'er that Power may move  
Which has withdrawn his being to its own;  
Which wields the world with never wearied love,  
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

**43**

He is a portion of the loveliness  
Which once he made more lovely: he doth bear  
380 His part, while the one Spirit's plastic<sup>o</sup> stress  
Sweeps through the dull dense world, compelling there,  
All new successions to the forms they wear;  
Torturing th' unwilling dross that checks its flight  
To its own likeness, as each mass may bear;<sup>7</sup>  
385 And bursting in its beauty and its might  
From trees and beasts and men into the Heaven's light.

#### 44

The splendours of the firmament of time  
May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not;  
Like stars to their appointed height they climb  
390 And death is a low mist which cannot blot  
The brightness it may veil.<sup>8</sup> When lofty thought  
Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,  
And love and life contend in it, for what<sup>o</sup>  
Shall be its earthly doom,<sup>o</sup> the dead live there<sup>9</sup>  
395 And move like winds of light on dark and stormy air.

#### 45

The inheritors of unfulfilled renown<sup>1</sup>  
Rose from their thrones, built beyond mortal thought,  
Far in the Unapparent. Chatterton  
Rose pale, his solemn agony had not  
400 Yet faded from him; Sidney, as he fought  
And as he fell and as he lived and loved  
Sublimely mild, a Spirit without spot,  
Arose; and Lucan, by his death approved:<sup>o</sup>  
Oblivion as they rose shrank like a thing reproved.  
405

#### 46

And many more, whose names on Earth are dark  
But whose transmitted effluence cannot die  
So long as fire outlives the parent spark,  
Rose, robed in dazzling immortality.

410 "Thou art become as one of us," they cry,  
"It was for thee yon kingless sphere has long  
Swung blind in unascended majesty,  
Silent alone amid an Heaven of song.  
Assume thy winged throne, thou Vesper of our throng!"<sup>2</sup>

#### 47

415 Who mourns for Adonais? oh come forth  
Fond<sup>o</sup> wretch! and know thyself and him aright.  
Clasp with thy panting soul the pendulous<sup>3</sup> Earth;  
As from a centre, dart thy spirit's light  
Beyond all worlds, until its spacious might<sup>o</sup>  
Sate the void circumference: then shrink  
420 Even to a point within our day and night;<sup>4</sup>  
And keep thy heart light lest it make thee sink  
When hope has kindled hope, and lured thee to the brink.

#### 48

425 Or go to Rome, which is the sepulchre  
O, not of him, but of our joy: 'tis nought  
That ages, empires, and religions there  
Lie buried in the ravage they have wrought;  
For such as he can lend,—they<sup>5</sup> borrow not  
Glory from those who made the world their prey;  
And he is gathered to the kings of thought  
430 Who waged contention with their time's decay,  
And of the past are all that cannot pass away.

#### 49

435 Go thou to Rome,—at once the Paradise,  
The grave, the city, and the wilderness;  
And where its wrecks<sup>o</sup> like shattered mountains rise,  
And flowering weeds, and fragrant copses<sup>6</sup> dress  
The bones of Desolation's nakedness  
Pass, till the Spirit of the spot shall lead  
Thy footsteps to a slope of green access<sup>7</sup>

440       Where, like an infant's smile,<sup>8</sup> over the dead,  
A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread.

## 50

And grey walls moulder round,<sup>9</sup> on which dull Time  
Feeds, like slow fire upon a hoary brand;<sup>1</sup>  
And one keen pyramid with wedge sublime,<sup>2</sup>  
445       Pavilioning the dust of him who planned  
This refuge for his memory, doth stand  
Like flame transformed to marble; and beneath,  
A field is spread, on which a newer band  
Have pitched in Heaven's smile their camp of death<sup>3</sup>  
450       Welcoming him we lose with scarce extinguished breath.

## 51

Here pause: these graves are all too young as yet  
To have outgrown the sorrow which consigned  
Its charge to each; and if the seal is set,  
Here, on one fountain of a mourning mind,<sup>4</sup>  
455       Break it not thou! too surely shalt thou find  
Thine own well full, if thou returnest home,  
Of tears and gall. From the world's bitter wind  
Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb.  
What Adonais is, why fear we to become?

## 52

460       The One remains, the many change and pass;  
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;  
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
Until Death tramples it to fragments.<sup>5</sup>—Die,  
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!  
465       Follow where all is fled!—Rome's azure sky,  
Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words, are weak  
The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.

## 53

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?  
 Thy hopes are gone before; from all things here  
 470 They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!  
 A light is past<sup>o</sup> from the revolving year,  
 And man, and woman; and what still is dear  
 Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.  
 The soft sky smiles,—the low wind whispers near:  
 475 'Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither,  
 No more let Life divide what Death can join together.

## 54

That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,  
 That Beauty in which all things work and move,  
 480 That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse  
 Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love  
 Which through the web of being blindly wove  
 By man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
 Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of<sup>f6</sup>  
 485 The fire for which all thirst;<sup>7</sup> now beams on me,  
 Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

## 55

The breath whose might I have invoked in song<sup>8</sup>  
 Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,  
 Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
 Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
 490 The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!<sup>9</sup>  
 I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;  
 Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
 The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
 495 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

1821

1821

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Shelley prefixed to *Adonais* a Greek epigraph attributed to Plato; this is Shelley's translation of the Greek. The planet Venus

appears both as the morning star, Lucifer, and as the evening star, Hesperus or Vesper. Shelley makes of this phenomenon a key symbol for Adonais's triumph over death, in stanzas 44–46.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Shelley follows the classical mode of personifying the hours, which mark the passage of time and turn of the seasons.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Urania. She had originally been the muse of astronomy, but the name was also an epithet for Venus. Shelley converts Venus Urania, who in Greek myth had been the lover of Adonis, into the mother of Adonais.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Alludes to the anonymity of the review of *Endymion*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, one of the Echoes (line 14).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Milton, regarded as precursor of the great poetic tradition in which Keats wrote. He had adopted Urania as the muse of *Paradise Lost*. Lines 31–35 describe Milton's life during the restoration of the Stuart monarchy.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In "A Defence of Poetry," Shelley says that Milton was the third great epic poet, along with Homer and Dante. The following stanza describes the fate of other poets, up to Shelley's own time.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: An allusion to an incident in Keats's *Isabella*.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The products of Keats's imagination, figuratively represented (according to the conventions of the pastoral elegy) as his sheep.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: One of the Dreams (line 73).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The cautious intellect (of the listener).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Because of her unrequited love for Narcissus, who was enamored of his own reflection (line 141), the nymph Echo pined away until she was only a reflected sound.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Young Hyacinthus was loved by Phoebus Apollo, who accidentally killed him in a game of quoits. Apollo made the hyacinth flower spring from his blood.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: To whom Keats had written "Ode to a Nightingale."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In the legend the aged eagle, to renew his youth, flies toward the sun until his old plumage is burned off and the film cleared from

his eyes.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: The reviewer of *Endymion*.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The “sword” is the mind that knows; the “sheath” is its vehicle, the material body.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, the Echo in line 127.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Because her heart had been given to Adonais.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, the hostile reviewers.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The allusion is to Perseus, who had cut off Medusa’s head while avoiding the direct sight of her (which would have turned him to stone) by looking only at her reflection in his shield.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, when thy spirit, like the full moon, should have reached its maturity.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Byron, who had directed against critics of the age his satiric poem *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809). The allusion is to Apollo, called “the Pythian” because he had slain the dragon Python.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, an insect that lives and dies in a single day.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: As the sun reveals the Earth but veils the other stars.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The other stars (creative minds), of lesser brilliance than the sun.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Byron, who had referred to his Childe Harold as one of the “wanderers o’er Eternity” (3.669).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Thomas Moore (1779–1852), from Ireland (“Ierne”), who had written poems about the oppression of his native land.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Shelley, represented in one of his aspects—such as the Poet in *Alastor*, rather than the author of *Prometheus Unbound*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Actaeon, while hunting, came upon the naked Diana bathing and, as a punishment, was turned into a stag and torn to pieces by his own hounds.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The heavy, overhanging hour of Keats’s death.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Like the thyrsus, the leaf-entwined and cone-topped staff carried by Dionysus, to whom leopards (see line 280) are sacred. The



pansies, which are “overblown,” that is, past their bloom, are emblems of sorrowful thought. The cypress is an emblem of mourning.[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: His bloody (“ensanguined”) brow bore a mark like that with which God had branded Cain for murdering Abel—or like that left by Christ’s crown of thorns.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In imitation of a memorial statue.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Leigh Hunt, close friend of both Keats and Shelley.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Snake; that is, the anonymous reviewer.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The promise of later greatness in Keats’s early poems “held . . . silent” the expression of “all envy, hate, and wrong” except the reviewer’s.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A species of hawk that feeds on dead flesh.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Shelley adopts for this poem the Neoplatonic view that all life and all forms emanate from the Absolute, the eternal One. The Absolute is imaged as both a radiant light source and an overflowing fountain, which circulates continuously through the dross of matter (stanza 43) and back to its source.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: He has soared beyond the shadow cast by the Earth as it intercepts the sun’s light.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Shelley’s science is accurate: it is the envelope of air around the Earth that, by diffusing and reflecting sunlight, veils the stars so that they are invisible during the day.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The nightingale, in allusion to Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.”[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, to the degree that a particular substance will permit.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The radiance of stars (that is, of poets) persists, even when they are temporarily “eclipsed” by another heavenly body, or obscured by the veil of the earth’s atmosphere.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, in the thought of the “young heart.”[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Poets who (like Keats) died young, before achieving their full measure of fame: The seventeen-year-old Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770) was believed to have committed suicide out of despair over his poverty and lack of recognition. Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586) died in battle at thirty-two. The Roman poet Lucan (39–65 C.E.) killed himself

at twenty-six to escape a sentence of death for having plotted against the tyrant Nero.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Adonais assumes his place in the sphere of Vesper, the evening star, hitherto unoccupied ("kingless"), hence also "silent" amid the music of the other spheres.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Suspended, floating in space.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The poet bids the mourner to stretch his imagination so as to reach the poet's own cosmic viewpoint and then allow it to contract ("shrink") back to its ordinary vantage point on Earth—where, unlike Adonais in his heavenly place, we have an alternation of day and night.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Poets such as Keats.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Undergrowth. In Shelley's time the ruins of ancient Rome were overgrown with weeds and shrubs, almost as if the ground were returning to its natural state.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The Protestant Cemetery, Keats's burial place. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: A glancing allusion to Shelley's three-year-old son, William, also buried there.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The wall of ancient Rome formed one boundary of the cemetery.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A burning log, white with ash.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The tomb of Caius Cestius, a Roman tribune, just outside the cemetery.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A common name for a cemetery in Italy is *camposanto*, "holy camp or ground." Shelley is punning on the Italian word.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Shelley's mourning for his son.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Earthly life colors ("stains") the pure white light of the One, which is the source of all light (see lines 339–40, n. 3). The azure sky, flowers, etc., of lines 466–68 exemplify earthly colors that, however beautiful, fall far short of the "glory" of the pure Light that they transmit but also refract ("transfuse").[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, according to the degree that each reflects.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: The "thirst" of the human spirit is to return to the fountain and fire (the "burning fountain," line 339) that are its source.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Two years earlier Shelley had “invoked” (prayed to, and also asked for) “the breath of Autumn’s being” in his “Ode to the West Wind” (p. 802, above). [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: In her 1839 edition of her husband’s works, Mary Shelley, thinking of the manner of Percy’s death, asked: “who but will regard as a prophecy the last stanza of the ‘Adonais’?” [Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *companions* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *forlorn* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *corpse* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *abyss* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *spirit* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *candles* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *radiant* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *last; highest* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bloomed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Rome* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *living* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *luminous* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rich garland* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *arrows* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *accustomed* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *clasps* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *song* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dried, withered* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pity* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lament* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *England* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thicket* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *briar* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *invisible* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *low* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *assuage* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Urania* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *tore* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *challenge* [Return to reference °](#)
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- °: *funeral bell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *leopardlike*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *bloodied*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *slander*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *formative, shaping*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *whatever*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *destiny*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *justified*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *foolish*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *power*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ruins*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *passed*[Return to reference](#) °

## When the lamp is shattered

When the lamp is shattered  
The light in the dust lies dead—  
When the cloud is scattered  
The rainbow's glory is shed—  
When the lute is broken  
5 Sweet tones are remembered not—  
When the lips have spoken  
Loved accents are soon forgot.

As music and splendour  
Survive not the lamp and the lute,  
10 The heart's echoes render  
No song when the spirit is mute—  
No song—but sad dirges  
Like the wind through a ruined cell  
Or the mournful surges  
15 That ring the dead seaman's knell.

When hearts have once mingled  
Love first leaves the well-built nest—  
The weak one is singled  
To endure what it once possest.  
20 O Love! who bewailest  
The frailty of all things here,  
Why choose you the frailest  
For your cradle, your home and your bier?

Its passions will rock thee  
25 As the storms rock the ravens on high—  
Bright Reason will mock thee  
Like the Sun from a wintry sky—

30           From thy nest every rafter  
              Will rot, and thine eagle home  
              Leave thee naked to laughter  
              When leaves fall and cold winds come.

1822

1824

**A Defence of Poetry** In 1820 Shelley's friend Thomas Love Peacock published an ironic essay, "The Four Ages of Poetry," implicitly directed against the towering claims for poetry and the poetic imagination made by his Romantic contemporaries. In this essay, Peacock adopted the premise of Wordsworth and other Romantic critics—that poetry in its origin was a primitive use of language and mind—but from this premise he proceeded to conclude that poetry had become a useless anachronism in his own Age of Bronze, a time defined by new sciences (including economics and political theory) and technologies that had the potential to improve the world. Peacock was a poet as well as an excellent prose satirist, and Shelley saw the joke; but he also recognized that the view that Peacock, as a satirist, had assumed was very close to that actually held in his day by Utilitarian philosophers and the material-minded public, which either attacked or contemptuously ignored the imaginative faculty and its achievements. He therefore undertook, as he good-humoredly wrote to Peacock, "to break a lance with you . . . in honor of my mistress Urania" (giving the cause for which he battled the name that Milton had used for the muse inspiring *Paradise Lost*), even though he was only "the knight of the shield of shadow and the lance of gossamere." The result was "A Defence of Poetry," planned to consist of three parts. The last two parts were never written, and even the existing section, written in 1821, remained unpublished until 1840, eighteen years after Shelley's death.

Shelley's emphasis in this essay is not on the particularity of individual poems but on the universal and permanent qualities and values that, he believes, all great poems, as products of imagination, have in common. Shelley in addition extends the term *poet* to include all creative minds that break out of the conditions of their historical time and place in order to envision such values. This category includes not only writers in prose as well as verse but also artists, legislators, prophets, and the founders of new social and religious institutions.

The "Defence" is an eloquent and enduring claim for the indispensability of the visionary and creative imagination in all the great human concerns. Few later social critics have equaled the cogency of Shelley's attack on our acquisitive society and its narrowly material concepts of utility and progress. Such a bias has opened the way to enormous advances in the physical sciences and our material well-being, but without a proportionate development of our "poetic faculty," the moral imagination. The result, Shelley says, is that "man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave."



# ***From A Defence of Poetry***

## ***or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled "The Four Ages of Poetry"***

According to one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which are called reason and imagination, the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced; and the latter, as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity. The one<sup>1</sup> is the *to poiein*,<sup>2</sup> or the principle of synthesis, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the *to logizein*,<sup>3</sup> or principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results. Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the Imagination": and poetry is connate with the origin of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Æolian lyre,<sup>4</sup> which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an

internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre. A child at play by itself will express its delight by its voice and motions; and every inflexion of tone and every gesture will bear exact relation to a corresponding antitype in the pleasurable impressions which awakened it; it will be the reflected image of that impression; and as the lyre trembles and sounds after the wind has died away, so the child seeks, by prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect, to prolong also a consciousness of the cause. In relation to the objects which delight a child, these expressions are, what poetry is to higher objects. The savage (for the savage is to ages what the child is to years) expresses the emotions produced in him by surrounding objects in a similar manner; and language and gesture, together with plastic<sup>5</sup> or pictorial imitation, become the image of the combined effect of those objects, and of his apprehension of them. Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, next becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions; and language, gesture, and the imitative arts, become at once the representation and the medium, the pencil and the picture, the chisel and the statue, the chord and the harmony. The social sympathies, or those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings coexist; the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence, become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social; and constitute pleasure in sensation, virtue in sentiment, beauty in art, truth in reasoning, and love in the intercourse of kind. Hence men, even in the infancy of society, observe a certain order in their words and actions, distinct from that of the objects and the impressions

represented by them, all expression being subject to the laws of that from which it proceeds. But let us dismiss those more general considerations which might involve an enquiry into the principles of society itself, and restrict our view to the manner in which the imagination is expressed upon its forms.

In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing<sup>6</sup> in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order, in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects. For there is a certain order or rhythm belonging to each of these classes of mimetic representation, from which the hearer and the spectator receive an intenser and purer pleasure than from any other: the sense of an approximation to this order has been called taste, by modern writers. Every man in the infancy of art, observes an order which approximates more or less closely to that from which this highest delight results: but the diversity is not sufficiently marked, as that its gradations should be sensible,<sup>7</sup> except in those instances where the predominance of this faculty of approximation to the beautiful (for so we may be permitted to name the relation between this highest pleasure and its cause) is very great. Those in whom it exists in excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts<sup>8</sup> instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the

world”<sup>9</sup>—and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem:<sup>1</sup> the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of Poetry.

But Poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion.<sup>2</sup> Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and like Janus<sup>3</sup> have a double face of false and true. Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets:<sup>4</sup> a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of persons and the distinction of place are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry, and

the choruses of Æschylus, and the book of Job, and Dante's Paradise would afford, more than any other writings, examples of this fact, if the limits of this essay did not forbid citation. The creations of sculpture, painting, and music, are illustrations still more decisive.

Language, colour, form, and religious and civil habits of action are all the instruments and materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonyme of the cause. But poetry in a more restricted sense<sup>5</sup> expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. And this springs from the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, than colour, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the controul of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments and conditions of art, have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression. The former<sup>6</sup> is as a mirror which reflects, the latter as a cloud which enfeebles, the light of which both are mediums of communication. Hence the fame of sculptors, painters and musicians, although the intrinsic powers of the great masters of these arts, may yield in no degree to that of those who have employed language as the hieroglyphic of their thoughts, has never equalled that of poets in the restricted sense of the term; as two performers of equal skill will produce unequal effects from a guitar and a harp. The fame of legislators and founders of religions, so long as their institutions last, alone seems to exceed that of poets in the restricted sense; but it can scarcely be a question whether, if we deduct the celebrity which their flattery of the gross opinions of the vulgar usually conciliates, together with that which belonged to them in their higher character of poets, any excess will remain.

We have thus circumscribed the meaning of the word Poetry within the limits of that art which is the most familiar and the most

perfect expression of the faculty itself. It is necessary however to make the circle still narrower, and to determine the distinction between measured and unmeasured language;<sup>7</sup> for the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy.

Sounds as well as thoughts have relation both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts. Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves, without reference to that peculiar order. Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed or it will bear no flower—and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.<sup>8</sup>

An observation of the regular mode of the recurrence of this harmony in the language of poetical minds, together with its relation to music, produced metre, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony of language. Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony which is its spirit, be observed. The practise is indeed convenient and popular, and to be preferred, especially in such composition as includes much form and action: but every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification. The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error. The distinction between philosophers and poets has been anticipated.<sup>9</sup> Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendour of his imagery and the melody of his language is the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the measure of the epic, dramatic, and lyrical forms, because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action, and he forbore to invent any regular plan of

rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style. Cicero<sup>1</sup> sought to imitate the cadence of his periods but with little success. Lord Bacon was a poet.<sup>2</sup> His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect; it is a strain which distends, and then bursts the circumference of the hearer's mind, and pours itself forth together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy. All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not only necessarily poets as they are inventors, nor even as their words unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth; but as their periods are harmonious and rhythmical and contain in themselves the elements of verse; being the echo of the eternal music. Nor are those supreme poets, who have employed traditional forms of rhythm on account of the form and action of their subjects, less capable of perceiving and teaching the truth of things, than those who have omitted that form. Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton (to confine ourselves to modern writers) are philosophers of the very loftiest power.

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stript of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of Poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epitomes<sup>3</sup> have been called the moths of just history;<sup>4</sup> they eat out the poetry of it. The story of particular



facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful: Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole though it be found in a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought. And thus all the great historians, Herodotus, Plutarch, Livy,<sup>5</sup> were poets; and although the plan of these writers, especially that of Livy, restrained them from developing this faculty in its highest degree, they make copious and ample amends for their subjection, by filling all the interstices of their subjects with living images.

Having determined what is poetry, and who are poets, let us proceed to estimate its effects upon society.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls, open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union. Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgement upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations. A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds: his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed. Homer embodied the ideal perfection of his age in human character; nor can we doubt that



those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector and Ulysses: the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism and persevering devotion to an object, were unveiled to the depths in these immortal creations: the sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations, until from admiring they imitated, and from imitation they identified themselves with the objects of their admiration. Nor let it be objected, that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they can by no means be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch under names more or less specious has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked Idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age; and Self-deceit is the veiled Image of unknown evil before which luxury and satiety lie prostrate. But a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as the temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty. An epic or dramatic personage is understood to wear them around his soul, as he may the antient armour or the modern uniform around his body; whilst it is easy to conceive a dress more graceful than either. The beauty of the internal nature cannot be so far concealed by its accidental vesture, but that the spirit of its form shall communicate itself to the very disguise, and indicate the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn. A majestic form and graceful motions will express themselves through the most barbarous and tasteless costume. Few poets of the highest class have chosen to exhibit the beauty of their conceptions in its naked truth and splendour; and it is doubtful whether the alloy of costume, habit, etc., be not necessary to temper this planetary music<sup>6</sup> for mortal ears.

The whole objection, however, of the immorality of poetry<sup>7</sup> rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science<sup>8</sup> arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and

deceive, and subjugate one another. But Poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces<sup>9</sup> all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content<sup>1</sup> which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists. The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination;<sup>2</sup> and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A Poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign the glory in a participation in the cause.<sup>3</sup> There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal Poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso,<sup>4</sup> Spenser, have frequently affected<sup>5</sup> a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is

diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.<sup>6</sup>

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It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense; the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes. For, from an inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the pain of the inferior is frequently connected with the pleasures of the superior portions of our being. Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fiction depends on this principle; tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain. This is the source also of the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody. The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself. And hence the saying, "It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of mirth."<sup>7</sup> Not that this highest species of pleasure is necessarily linked with pain. The delight of love and friendship, the ecstasy of the admiration of nature, the joy of the perception and still more of the creation of poetry is often wholly unalloyed.

The production and assurance of pleasure in this highest sense is true utility. Those who produce and preserve this pleasure are Poets or poetical philosophers.

The exertions of Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau,<sup>8</sup> and their disciples, in favour of oppressed and deluded humanity, are entitled to the gratitude of mankind. Yet it is easy to calculate the degree of moral and intellectual improvement which the world would have exhibited, had they never lived. A little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women, and children, burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment have been congratulating each other on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain.<sup>9</sup> But it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon,

nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of antient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the antient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or at least, what is wiser and better than what men now practise and endure. But we let "*I dare not wait upon I would*, like the poor cat i' the adage."<sup>1</sup> We want<sup>2</sup> the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty, which is the basis of all knowledge, is to be attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labour, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind? From what other cause has it arisen that these inventions which should have lightened, have added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam?<sup>3</sup> Poetry, and the principle of Self, of

which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world.<sup>4</sup>

The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good. The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. The body has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it.

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things; it is as the odour and the colour of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and the splendour of unfaded beauty to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. What were Virtue, Love, Patriotism, Friendship etc.—what were the scenery of this beautiful Universe which we inhabit—what were our consolations on this side of the grave—and what were our aspirations beyond it—if Poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar? Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.” The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious

portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet. I appeal to the greatest Poets of the present day, whether it be not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study. The toil and the delay recommended by critics can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connexion of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of conventional expressions; a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself. For Milton conceived the *Paradise Lost* as a whole before he executed it in portions. We have his own authority also for the Muse having "dictated" to him the "unpremeditated song,"<sup>5</sup> and let this be an answer to those who would allege the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the *Orlando Furioso*.<sup>6</sup> Compositions so produced are to poetry what mosaic is to painting. This instinct and intuition of the poetical faculty is still more observable in the plastic and pictorial arts: a great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process.

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest<sup>7</sup> moments of the happiest and best minds. We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression: so that even in the desire and the regret they leave, there cannot but be pleasure, participating as it does in the nature of its object. It is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its footsteps are like those of a wind over a sea, where the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain

only as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility<sup>8</sup> and the most enlarged imagination; and the state of mind produced by them is at war with every base desire. The enthusiasm of virtue, love, patriotism, and friendship is essentially linked with these emotions; and whilst they last, self appears as what it is, an atom to a Universe. Poets are not only subject to these experiences as spirits of the most refined organization, but they can colour all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this etherial world; a word, or a trait in the representation of a scene or a passion, will touch the enchanted chord, and reanimate, in those who have ever experienced these emotions, the sleeping, the cold, the buried image of the past. Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world; it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations<sup>9</sup> of life, and veiling them or in language or in form sends them forth among mankind, bearing sweet news of kindred joy to those with whom their sisters abide—abide, because there is no portal of expression from the caverns of the spirit which they inhabit into the universe of things. Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold<sup>1</sup> the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.

All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient. "The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."<sup>2</sup> But poetry defeats the curse



which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.<sup>3</sup> It justifies that bold and true word of Tasso: *Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta.*<sup>4</sup>

A Poet, as he is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue and glory, so he ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men. As to his glory, let Time be challenged to declare whether the fame of any other institutor of human life be comparable to that of a poet. That he is the wisest, the happiest, and the best, inasmuch as he is a poet, is equally incontrovertible: the greatest poets have been men of the most spotless virtue, of the most consummate prudence, and, if we could look into the interior of their lives, the most fortunate of men: and the exceptions, as they regard those who possessed the poetic faculty in a high yet inferior degree, will be found on consideration to confirm rather than destroy the rule. Let us for a moment stoop to the arbitration of popular breath, and usurping and uniting in our own persons the incompatible characters of accuser, witness, judge and executioner, let us decide without trial, testimony, or form that certain motives of those who are "there sitting where we dare not soar"<sup>5</sup> are reprehensible. Let us assume that Homer was a drunkard, that Virgil was a flatterer, that Horace was a coward, that Tasso was a madman, that Lord Bacon was a peculator, that Raphael was a libertine, that Spenser was a poet laureate.<sup>6</sup> It is inconsistent with this division of our subject to cite living poets, but Posterity has done ample justice to the great names now referred to. Their errors have



been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins “were as scarlet, they are now white as snow”;<sup>7</sup> they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and the redeemer Time. Observe in what a ludicrous chaos the imputations of real or fictitious crime have been confused in the contemporary calumnies against poetry and poets;<sup>8</sup> consider how little is, as it appears—or appears, as it is; look to your own motives, and judge not, lest ye be judged.<sup>9</sup>

Poetry, as has been said, in this respect differs from logic, that it is not subject to the controul of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will. It is presumptuous to determine that these<sup>1</sup> are the necessary conditions of all mental causation, when mental effects are experienced insusceptible of being referred to them. The frequent recurrence of the poetical power, it is obvious to suppose, may produce in the mind an habit of order and harmony correlative with its own nature and with its effects upon other minds. But in the intervals of inspiration, and they may be frequent without being durable, a poet becomes a man, and is abandoned to the sudden reflux of the influences under which others habitually live. But as he is more delicately organized than other men, and sensible<sup>2</sup> to pain and pleasure, both his own and that of others, in a degree unknown to them, he will avoid the one and pursue the other with an ardour proportioned to this difference. And he renders himself obnoxious to calumny,<sup>3</sup> when he neglects to observe the circumstances under which these objects of universal pursuit and flight have disguised themselves in one another’s garments.

But there is nothing necessarily evil in this error, and thus cruelty, envy, revenge, avarice, and the passions purely evil, have never formed any portion of the popular imputations on the lives of poets.

I have thought it most favourable to the cause of truth to set down these remarks according to the order in which they were suggested to my mind, by a consideration of the subject itself, instead of following that of the treatise that excited me to make

them public.<sup>4</sup> Thus although devoid of the formality of a polemical reply; if the view they contain be just, they will be found to involve a refutation of the doctrines of the Four Ages of Poetry, so far at least as regards the first division of the subject. I can readily conjecture what should have moved the gall of the learned and intelligent author of that paper; I confess myself, like him, unwilling to be stunned by the Theseids of the hoarse Codri of the day. Bavius and Maevius<sup>5</sup> undoubtedly are, as they ever were, insufferable persons. But it belongs to a philosophical critic to distinguish rather than confound.

The first part of these remarks has related to Poetry in its elements and principles; and it has been shewn, as well as the narrow limits assigned them would permit, that what is called poetry, in a restricted sense, has a common source with all other forms of order and of beauty according to which the materials of human life are susceptible of being arranged, and which is poetry in an universal sense.

The second part<sup>6</sup> will have for its object an application of these principles to the present state of the cultivation of Poetry, and a defence of the attempt to idealize the modern forms of manners and opinions, and compel them into a subordination to the imaginative and creative faculty. For the literature of England, an energetic developement of which has ever preceded or accompanied a great and free developement of the national will, has arisen as it were from a new birth. In spite of the low-thoughted envy which would undervalue contemporary merit, our own will be a memorable age in intellectual achievements, and we live among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty.<sup>7</sup> The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. The persons in whom this power resides, may often, as far as regards many portions of their nature,

have little apparent correspondence with that spirit of good of which they are the ministers. But even whilst they deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve, the Power which is seated upon the throne of their own soul. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants<sup>8</sup> of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves.<sup>9</sup> Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

1821

1840

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The imagination. "The other" (later in the sentence) is the reason.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Making. The Greek word from which the English term *poet* derives means "maker," and the word *maker* was often used as equivalent to "poet" by Renaissance critics such as Sir Philip Sidney in his *Defence of Poesy*, which Shelley had carefully studied.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Calculating, reasoning.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A wind harp (see Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," p. 471, above).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Sculptural.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Following, obeying.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Discernible.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, abstract concepts.[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* 3.1.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A group of poems (for example, "the Arthurian cycle") that deal with the same subject.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Here Shelley enlarges the scope of the term *poetry* to denote all the creative achievements, or imaginative breakthroughs, of humankind, including noninstitutional religious insights.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Roman god of beginnings and endings, often represented by two heads facing opposite directions.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Sir Philip Sidney had pointed out, in his *Defence of Poesy*, that *vates*, the Roman term for "poet," signifies "a diviner, fore-seer, or Prophet."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, restricted to specifically verbal poetry, as against the inclusive sense in which Shelley has been applying the term.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, language, as opposed to the media of sculpture, painting, and music.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, in meter versus in prose.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: When the descendants of Noah, who spoke a single language, undertook to build the Tower of Babel, which would reach heaven, God cut short the attempt by multiplying languages so that the builders could no longer communicate (see Genesis 11:1–9).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, in what Shelley has already said.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Marcus Tullius Cicero, the great Roman orator of the 1st century B.C.E.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: See the *Filium Labyrinthi* and the *Essay on Death* particularly [*Shelley's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Abstracts, summaries.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: By Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* 2.2.4.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Titus Livius (59 B.C.E.–17 C.E.) wrote an immense history of Rome. Herodotus (ca. 480–ca. 425 B.C.E.) wrote the first

systematic history of Greece. Plutarch (ca. 46–ca. 120 C.E.) wrote *Parallel Lives* (of eminent Greeks and Romans).[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: The music made by the revolving crystalline spheres of the planets, inaudible to human ears.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In the preceding paragraph Shelley has been implicitly dealing with the charge, voiced by Plato in his *Republic*, that poetry is immoral because it represents evil characters acting evilly.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Moral philosophy.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Produces anew, re-creates.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Contentment.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Central to Shelley's theory is the concept (developed by 18th-century philosophers) of the sympathetic imagination—the faculty by which an individual is enabled to identify with the thoughts and feelings of others. Shelley insists that the faculty in poetry that enables us to share the joys and sufferings of invented characters is also the basis of all morality, for it compels us to feel for others as we feel for ourselves.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The “effect,” or the explicit moral standards into which imaginative insights are translated at a particular time or place, is contrasted to the “cause” of all morality, the imagination itself.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Torquato Tasso (1544–1595), Italian poet, author of *Jerusalem Delivered*, an epic poem about a crusade. Euripides (ca. 484–406 B.C.E.), Greek writer of tragedies. Lucan (39–65 C.E.), Roman poet, author of the *Pharsalia*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Assumed, adopted.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In the following, omitted, passage Shelley reviews the history of drama and poetry in relation to civilization and morality and proceeds to refute the charge that poets are less useful than “reasoners and merchants.” He begins by defining *utility* in terms of pleasure and then distinguishes between the lower (physical and material) and the higher (imaginative) pleasures.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Ecclesiastes 7:2.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: I follow the classification adopted by the author of *Four Ages of Poetry*. But Rousseau was essentially a poet. The others, even Voltaire, were mere reasoners [*Shelley's note*].[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The Inquisition had been suspended following the Spanish Revolution of 1820, the year before Shelley wrote this essay; it was not abolished permanently until 1834.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The words with which Lady Macbeth encourages her husband's ambition (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 1.7.44–45).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Lack.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: God says to Adam: "cursed is the ground for thy sake. . . . Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth. . . . In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground" (Genesis 3:17–19).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Matthew 6:24: "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: *Paradise Lost* 9.21–24.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The epic poem by the 16th-century Italian poet Ariosto, noted for his care in composition.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In the double sense of "most joyous" and "most apt or felicitous in invention."[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Sensitivity, capacity for sympathetic feeling.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The dark intervals between the old and new moons.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Alchemists aimed to produce a drinkable ("potable") form of gold that would be an elixir of life, curing all diseases.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Satan's speech, *Paradise Lost* 1.254–55.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Shelley's version of a widespread Romantic doctrine that the poetic imagination transforms the familiar into the miraculous and re-creates the old world into a new world. See,

for example, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, chap. 4 (p. 521, above): "To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years has rendered familiar; . . . this is the character and privilege of genius."[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: "No one merits the name of Creator except God and the Poet." Quoted by Pierantonio Serassi in his *Life of Torquato Tasso* (1785).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Satan's scornful words to the angels who discover him after he has surreptitiously entered Eden: "Ye knew me once no mate / For you, sitting where ye durst not soar" (*Paradise Lost* 4.828–29).[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Charges that had in fact been made against these men. The use of "poet laureate" as a derogatory term was a dig at Robert Southey, who held that honor at the time Shelley was writing. "Peculator": an embezzler of public money. Raphael is the 16th-century Italian painter.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Isaiah 1:18.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Shelley alludes especially to the charges of immorality by contemporary reviewers against Byron and himself.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Christ's warning in Matthew 7:1.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: That is, consciousness or will. Shelley again proposes that some mental processes are unconscious—outside our control or awareness.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, sensitive to, conscious of. Compare Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (p. 344, above): "What is a poet? . . . He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm, and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Exposed to slander.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Peacock's "Four Ages of Poetry."[Return to reference 4](#)



- Note 5: Would-be poets satirized by Virgil and Horace. “Theseids”: epic poems about Theseus. Codrus (plural “Codri”) was the Roman author of a long, dull *Theseid* attacked by Juvenal and others. In 1794 and 1795 the conservative critic William Gifford had borrowed from Virgil and Horace and published the *Baviad* and the *Maeviad*, hard-hitting and highly influential satires on popular poetry and drama.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Shelley, however, completed only the first part.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In the age of Milton and the English Civil Wars.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Priests who are expositors of sacred mysteries.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Aristotle had said that God is the “Unmoved Mover” of the universe.[Return to reference 9](#)



## JOHN CLARE

### 1793–1864

Since the mid-eighteenth century, when critics had begun to worry that the authentic vigor of poetry was being undermined in their age of modern learning and refinement, they had looked for untaught primitive geniuses among the nation's peasantry. In the early-nineteenth-century literary scene, John Clare was the nearest thing to a "natural poet" there was. An earlier peasant poet, Robert Burns, had managed to acquire a solid liberal education. Clare, however, was born at Helpston, a Northamptonshire village, the son of a field laborer and a mother who was entirely illiterate, and he obtained only enough schooling to enable him to read and write. Although he was a sickly and fearful child, he had to work hard in the field, where he found himself composing verse "for downright pleasure in giving vent to my feelings." The fragments of an autobiography that he wrote later in life describe movingly, and with humor, the stratagems that as a young man he devised to find the time and the materials for writing. A blank notebook could cost him a week's wages. In 1820 publication of his *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* attracted critical attention, and on a trip to London, he was made much of by leading writers of the day. But his celebrity soon dimmed, and his three later books of verse were financial failures. Under these and other disappointments his mind gave way in 1837, and he spent almost all the rest of his life in an asylum. The place was for him a refuge as well as a confinement, for he was

treated kindly, allowed to wander about the countryside, and encouraged to go on writing his verses. Some of his best achievements are the poems composed during his madness.

Clare did not, of course, write independently of literary influences, for he had studied the poetry of James Thomson, William Cowper, Burns, Milton, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. But he stayed true to his own experience of everyday country sights and customs. His nightingale poem, written in a long-established literary tradition, has many more particulars of nature than any of those by his predecessors, and his homely mouse, in the "nest poem" reprinted here, is a bit of pure rustic impressionism in a way that even Burns's moralized mouse is not (see "To a Mouse," [p. 173](#), above). Some of Clare's introspective asylum poems achieve so haunting a poignancy and are spoken in so quietly distinctive a voice that they have made the great mass of manuscripts he left at his death an exciting place of discovery for scholars.

Those same manuscripts have been, however, a site of contention among Clare critics. Words are spelled erratically, and there is almost no punctuation: the pages are cluttered with revisions and erasures. In his own day Clare was respelled, punctuated, and generally tidied up by his publisher, John Taylor. (Taylor had done the same for John Keats, another of his poets who took a casual view of such matters.) Clare had mixed feelings about the transformation his writings underwent as they became printed books. Sometimes it felt like meddling. Critics and editors who propose that Clare's works should now be published without such emendation often cite a letter he sent to Taylor in 1822. "Grammer in learning is like Tyranny in government," Clare wrote: "confound the bitch, I'll never be her slave." As the analogy suggests, the standardization of his language that Taylor promoted, as he tried to broaden the poems' appeal and bring them into line with the expectations of a middle-class readership, could to the poet feel like an instance of class oppression. (Clare's aristocratic patrons in Northamptonshire certainly felt free to warn their protégé away from vulgarity and rebelliousness.) On the other hand, Clare actively

sought assistance in preparing his work for the press and often acknowledged that the work was better for that assistance: "If I cannot hear from John Taylor now and then I cannot rhyme." And Taylor took to print himself to dispute readers' objections to Clare's unconventional diction and their wish (as he put it) that Clare "would *thresh* and not *thump* the corn."

Between 1984 and 2003 Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P. M. S. Dawson, who number among those modern critics who believe that Clare's work should be presented without editors' emendations, took on the monumental task of transcribing Clare's thirty-five hundred manuscript poems for a nine-volume edition for Oxford University Press. Their edition aims for the utmost fidelity to the manuscripts. But in that form, however authentic, the poems can be difficult reading for an audience that is not already familiar with Clare's voice. The texts printed here are therefore presented as "reading" versions of Clare's lines and employ modern punctuation and spelling.

# Life, Death, and Eternity

A shadow moving by one's side,  
That would a substance seem—  
That is, yet is not,—though descried—  
Like skies beneath the stream;  
5 A tree that's ever in the bloom,  
Whose fruit is never rife;<sup>o</sup>  
A wish for joys that never come—  
Such are the hopes of Life.

A dark, inevitable night,  
A blank that will remain;  
10 A waiting for the morning light,  
Where waiting is in vain;  
A gulph, where pathway never led  
To show the depth beneath;  
A thing we know not, yet we dread—  
15 That dreaded thing is Death.

The vaulted void of purple sky  
That every where extends,  
That stretches from the dazzled eye,  
In space that never ends;  
20 A morning whose uprisen sun  
No setting e'er shall see;  
A day that comes without a noon—  
Such is Eternity.

1827

## Notes

- <sup>o</sup>: plentiful [Return to reference <sup>o</sup>](#)

## The Nightingale's Nest

Up this green woodland ride<sup>o</sup> let's softly rove,  
And list<sup>o</sup> the nightingale—she dwelleth here.  
Hush! let the wood gate softly clap, for fear  
The noise may drive her from her home of love;  
5 For here I've heard her many a merry year—  
At morn and eve, nay, all the livelong day,  
As though she lived on song. This very spot,  
Just where that old man's beard<sup>1</sup> all wildly trails  
Rude arbours o'er the road and stops the way—  
And where that child its blue-bell flowers hath got,  
10 Laughing and creeping through the mossy rails<sup>o</sup>—  
There have I hunted like a very boy,  
Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorns  
To find her nest and see her feed her young.  
And vainly did I many hours employ:  
15 All seemed as hidden as a thought unborn.  
And where these crimping<sup>o</sup> fern leaves ramp<sup>o</sup> among  
The hazel's under-boughs, I've nestled down  
And watched her while she sung; and her renown  
Hath made me marvel that so famed a bird<sup>2</sup>  
20 Should have no better dress than russet brown.  
Her wings would tremble in her ecstasy,  
And feathers stand on end, as 'twere with joy,  
And mouth wide open to release her heart  
Of its out-sobbing songs. The happiest part  
25 Of summer's fame she shared, for so to me  
Did happy fancies shapen her employ;<sup>3</sup>  
But if I touched a bush or scarcely stirred,  
All in a moment stopt. I watched in vain:  
The timid bird had left the hazel bush,

And at a distance hid to sing again.  
30 Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves,  
Rich ecstasy would pour its luscious strain,  
Till envy spurred the emulating thrush  
To start less wild and scarce inferior songs;  
35 For cares with him for half the year remain,  
To damp the ardour of his speckled breast,  
While nightingales to summer's life belongs,  
And naked trees and winter's nipping wrongs  
Are strangers to her music and her rest.  
40 Her joys are evergreen, her world is wide—  
Hark! there she is as usual—let's be hush—  
For in this black-thorn clump, if rightly guessed,  
Her curious house is hidden. Part aside  
These hazel branches in a gentle way,  
45 And stoop right cautious 'neath the rustling boughs,  
For we will have another search to-day,  
And hunt this fern-strewn thorn clump round and  
round;  
And where this seeded wood grass idly bows,  
We'll wade right through, it is a likely nook:  
50 In such like spots, and often on the ground,  
They'll build where rude boys never think to look—  
Aye, as I live! her secret nest is here,  
Upon this whitethorn stulp<sup>o</sup>—I've searched about  
For hours in vain. There! put that bramble by—  
55 Nay, trample on its branches and get near.  
How subtle is the bird! she started out  
And raised a plaintive note of danger nigh,  
Ere we were past the brambles; and now, near  
Her nest, she sudden stops—as<sup>o</sup> choking fear  
60 That might betray her home. So even now  
We'll leave it as we found it: safety's guard  
Of pathless solitude shall keep it still.  
See, there she's sitting on the old oak bough,  
Mute in her fears; our presence doth retard

65 Her joys, and doubt turns all her rapture chill.  
 Sing on, sweet bird! may no worse hap<sup>o</sup> befall  
 Thy visions, than the fear that now deceives.  
 We will not plunder music of its dower,<sup>o</sup>  
 70 Nor turn this spot of happiness to thrall;<sup>o</sup>  
 For melody seems hid in every flower,  
 That blossoms near thy home. These harebells all  
 Seem bowing with the beautiful in song;  
 And gaping cuckoo<sup>o</sup> with its spotted leaves  
 Seems blushing of the singing it has heard.  
 75 How curious is the nest; no other bird  
 Uses such loose materials, or weaves  
 Their dwellings in such spots: dead oaken leaves  
 Are placed without, and velvet moss within,  
 And little scraps of grass, and, scant and spare,  
 80 Of what seems scarce materials, down and hair;  
 For from man's haunts she seemeth nought to win.  
 Yet nature is the builder and contrives  
 Homes for her children's comfort even here;  
 Where solitude's disciples spend their lives  
 85 Unseen save when a wanderer passes near  
 That loves such pleasant places. Deep adown,  
 The nest is made an hermit's mossy cell.  
 Snug lie her curious eggs, in number five,  
 Of deadened green, or rather olive brown;  
 90 And the old prickly thorn-bush guards them well.  
 And here we'll leave them, still unknown to wrong,  
 As the old woodland's legacy of song.

1825–30

1835

## Endnotes

- Note 1: *Clematis vitalba*, a vine.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The nightingale had been celebrated by, among others, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and, closer to Clare's time, William Cowper, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats. In lines 22, 24–25, and 33, Clare echoes lines 57–58 of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (see p. 970, below). [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Give shape to her (the nightingale's) regular activities. [Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *riding path* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *listen to* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fence rails* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *curling* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *shoot up* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *stump* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *as if* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fate* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dowry, gift* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *misery* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *a spring flower* [Return to reference °](#)



# Insects

These tiny loiterers on the barley's beard  
And happy units of a numerous herd  
Of playfellows, the laughing Summer brings,  
Mocking<sup>o</sup> the sunshine on their glittering wings.  
How merrily they creep, and run, and fly!  
5 No kin they bear to labour's drudgery,  
Smoothing the velvet of the pale hedge-rose,  
And where they fly for dinner no one knows—  
The dew-drops feed them not—they love the shine  
Of noon, whose suns may bring them golden wine.  
10 All day they're playing in their Sunday dress—  
When night reposes, for they can do no less;  
Then, to the heath-bell's purple hood they fly,  
And like to princes in their slumbers lie,  
Secure from rain, and dropping dews, and all,  
15 In silken beds and roomy painted hall.  
So merrily they spend their summer-day,  
Now in the corn-fields, now the new-mown hay,  
One almost fancies that such happy things,  
With coloured hoods and richly burnished wings,  
20 Are fairy folk, in splendid masquerade  
Disguised, as if of mortal folk afraid,  
Keeping their joyous pranks a mystery still,  
Lest glaring day should do their secrets ill.

1835

## Notes

- <sup>o</sup>: *mimicking*[Return to reference](#) <sup>o</sup>

## The Yellowhammer's Nest

Just by the wooden bridge a bird flew up,  
Frit<sup>o</sup> by the cowboy,<sup>o</sup> as he scrambled down  
To reach the misty dewberry<sup>1</sup>—Let us stoop,  
And seek its nest. The brook we need not dread—  
5 'Tis scarcely deep enough a bee to drown,  
As it sings harmless o'er its pebbly bed.  
—Aye, here it is! stuck close beside the bank,  
Beneath the bunch of grass, that spindles rank  
Its husk-seeds tall and high:—'tis rudely planned  
10 Of bleached stubbles, and the withered fare  
That last year's harvest left upon the land—  
Lined thinly with the horse's sable hair.  
Five eggs, pen-scribbled o'er with ink their shells,  
Resembling writing-scrawls, which Fancy reads  
As Nature's poesy, and pastoral spells—  
15 They are the Yellowhammer's; and she dwells,  
Most poet-like, where brooks and flowery weeds  
As sweet as Castaly<sup>2</sup> her fancy deems;  
And that old mole-hill is Parnassus' hill,  
On which her partner haply sits and dreams  
20 O'er all his joys of song. Let's leave it still  
A happy home of sunshine, flowers, and streams.  
Yet is the sweetest place exposed to ill,  
A noisome weed, that burthens every soil;  
For snakes are known, with chill and deadly coil,  
25 To watch such nests, and seize the helpless young;  
And like as if the plague became a guest,  
To leave a houseless home, a ruined nest:  
Aye: mournful hath the little warbler sung  
When such like woes have rent his gentle breast.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Species of blackberry.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Castaly fountain, on Mount Parnassus, the Greek mountain sacred to the muses. Its waters inspired those who drank them with the power of poetry.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *frightened* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cattle herd* [Return to reference °](#)

# Pastoral Poesy

True poesy is not in words,  
But images that thoughts express,  
By which the simplest hearts are stirred  
To elevated happiness.

5      Mere books would be but useless things  
Where none had taste or mind to read,  
Like unknown lands where beauty springs  
And none are there to heed.

10      But poesy is a language meet,<sup>o</sup>  
And fields are every one's employ;<sup>o</sup>  
The wild flower 'neath the shepherd's feet  
Looks up and gives him joy;

15      A language that is ever green,  
That feelings unto all impart,  
As hawthorn blossoms, soon as seen,  
Give May to every heart.

20      The pictures that our summer minds  
In summer's dwellings meet;  
The fancies that the shepherd finds  
To make his leisure sweet;

The dust mills that the cowboy delves  
In banks for dust to run,<sup>1</sup>  
Creates a summer in ourselves—  
He does as we have done.

25      An image to the mind is brought,  
Where happiness enjoys

An easy thoughtlessness of thought  
And meets excess of joys.

30 The world is in that little spot  
With him—and all beside  
Is nothing, all a life forgot,  
In feelings satisfied.

35 And such is poesy; its power  
May varied lights employ,  
Yet to all minds it gives the dower  
Of self-creating joy.

40 And whether it be hill or moor,  
I feel where'er I go  
A silence that discourses more  
That any tongue can do.

Unruffled quietness hath made  
A peace in every place,  
And woods are resting in their shade  
Of social loneliness.

45 The storm, from which the shepherd turns  
To pull his beaver<sup>o</sup> down,  
While he upon the heath sojourns,  
Which autumn bleaches brown,

50 Is music, aye, and more indeed  
To those of musing mind  
Who through the yellow woods proceed  
And listen to the wind.

The poet in his fitful glee  
And fancy's many moods  
Meets it as some strange melody,  
And poem of the woods.

55     It sings and whistles in his mind,  
And then it talks aloud,  
While by some leaning tree reclined  
He shuns a coming cloud,  
60     That sails its bulk against the sun,  
A mountain in the light—  
He heeds not for the storm begun  
But dallies with delight.

65     And now a harp that flings around  
The music of the wind,  
The poet often hears the sound  
When beauty fills the mind.

70     The morn with saffron<sup>o</sup> strips and gray,  
Or blushing to the view,  
Like summer fields when run away  
In weeds of crimson hue,

75     Will simple shepherds' hearts imbue  
With nature's poesy,  
Who inly fancy while they view  
How grand must heaven be.

80     With every musing mind she steals  
Attendance<sup>2</sup> on their way;  
The simplest thing her heart reveals  
Is seldom thrown away.

     The old man, full of leisure hours,  
Sits cutting at his door  
Rude fancy sticks to tie his flowers  
—They're sticks and nothing more  
With many passing by his door—

85 But pleasure has its bent;<sup>o</sup>  
With him 'tis happiness and more,  
Heart satisfied content.

90 Those box-edged borders that impart  
Their fragrance near his door  
Hath been the comfort of his heart  
For sixty years and more.

95 That mossy thatch above his head  
In winter's drifting showers  
To him and his old partner made  
A music many hours.

100 It patted to their hearts a joy<sup>3</sup>  
That humble comfort made—  
A little fire to keep them dry  
And shelter over head.

And such no matter what they call  
Each all are nothing less  
Than poesy's power that gives to all  
A cheerful blessedness.

105 So would I my own mind employ,  
And my own heart impress,  
That poesy's self's a dwelling joy  
Of humble quietness.

110 So would I for the biding<sup>o</sup> joy  
That to such thoughts belong,  
That I life's errand may employ  
As harmless as a song.

1824–32

1935

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The boy tending the cows has (as an amusement) dug miniature millstreams in the dirt.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: She (nature) demands attention (to her beauties).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The patter of the rain on the thatch (lines 93–94) enhanced the comfort of the fire and shelter indoors.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *suitable, proper*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *concern*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *beaver hat*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *orange-yellow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *inclination*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *abiding, lasting*[Return to reference °](#)



## [The Lament of Swordy Well]<sup>1</sup>

Petitioners are full of prayers  
To fall in pity's way,  
But if her hand the gift forbears  
They'll sooner swear than pray.  
5 They're not the worst to want who lurch  
On plenty with complaints,  
No more than those who go to church  
Are e'er the better saints.

I hold no hat to beg a mite  
Nor pick it up when thrown,  
10 Nor limping leg I hold in sight  
But pray to keep me own.  
Where profit gets his clutches in  
There's little he will leave;  
Gain stooping for a single pin  
15 Will stick it on his sleeve.

For passers-by I never pin  
No troubles to my breast,  
Nor carry round some names to win,  
20 More money from the rest.  
I'm Swordy Well, a piece of land  
That's fell upon the town,  
Who worked me till I couldn't stand  
And crush me now I'm down.

25 In parish bonds I well may wail,  
Reduced to every shift;  
Pity may grieve at trouble's tale,  
But cunning shares the gift.

Harvests with plenty on his brow  
Leaves losses' taunts with me,  
30 Yet gain comes yearly with the plough  
And will not let me be.

Alas, dependence thou'rt a brute  
Want<sup>o</sup> only understands;  
His feelings wither branch and root  
35 That falls in parish hands.  
The muck that clouts the ploughman's shoe,  
The moss that hides the stone,  
Now I'm become the parish due  
40 Is more than I can own.

Though I'm no man yet any wrong  
Some sort of right may seek;  
And I am glad if e'en a song  
Gives me the room to speak.  
45 I've got among such grubbling gear<sup>2</sup>  
And such a hungry pack,  
If I brought harvests twice a year,  
They'd bring me nothing back.

When war their tyrant prices got,  
I trembled with alarms;  
50 They fell and saved my little spot,  
Or towns had turned to farms.  
Let profit keep an humble place  
That gentry may be known;  
Let pedigrees their honours trace  
55 And toil enjoy its own.

The silver springs grown naked dykes  
Scarce own a bunch of rushes;  
When grain got high the tasteless tykes<sup>o</sup>  
Grubbed up trees, banks, and bushes,

60 And me, they turned me inside out  
For sand and grit and stones  
And turned my old green hills about  
And picked my very bones.

65 These things that claim my own as theirs  
Were born but yesterday,  
But ere I fell to town affairs  
I were as proud as they.  
I kept my horses, cows, and sheep  
And built the town below  
70 Ere they had cat or dog to keep—  
And then to use me so.

Parish allowance, gaunt and dread,  
Had it the earth to keep  
Would even pine<sup>o</sup> the bees to dead  
75 To save an extra keep.  
Pride's workhouse<sup>3</sup> is a place that yields  
From poverty its gains  
And mine's a workhouse for the fields  
A-starving the remains.

80 The bees fly round in feeble rings  
And find no blossom by,  
Then thrum<sup>o</sup> their almost weary wings  
Upon the moss and die.  
Rabbits that find my hills turned o'er  
85 Forsake my poor abode;  
They dread a workhouse like the poor  
And nibble on the road.

If with a clover bottle now  
Spring dares to lift her head,  
90 The next day brings the hasty plough  
And makes me misery's bed.

95 The butterflies may whirl and come,  
I cannot keep 'em now,  
Nor can they bear my parish home  
That withers on my brow.

No, now not e'en a stone can lie,  
I'm just what e'er they like;  
My hedges like the winter fly  
And leave me but the dyke;  
100 My gates are thrown from off the hooks,  
The parish thoroughfare:  
Lord, he that's in the parish books  
Has little wealth to spare.

105 I couldn't keep a dust of grit  
Nor scarce a grain of sand,  
But bags and carts claimed every bit,  
And now they've got the land.  
I used to bring the summer's life  
To many a butterfly,  
110 But in oppression's iron strife  
Dead tussocks<sup>o</sup> bow and sigh.

I've scarce a nook to call my own  
For things that creep or fly;  
The beetle hiding 'neath a stone  
115 Does well to hurry by;  
Stock<sup>4</sup> eats my struggles every day  
As bare as any road;  
He's sure to be in something's way  
If e'er he stirs abroad.

120 I am no man to whine and beg,  
But fond of freedom still,  
I hing<sup>o</sup> no lies on pity's peg  
To bring a grist to mill;

125 On pity's back I needn't jump,  
My looks speak loud alone:  
My only tree they've left a stump  
And nought remains my own.

My mossy hills gain's greedy hand,  
And more than greedy mind,  
130 Levels into a russet land,  
Nor leaves a bent<sup>o</sup> behind.  
In summers gone I bloomed in pride,  
Folks came for miles to prize  
My flowers that bloomed nowhere beside  
135 And scarce believed their eyes.

Yet worried with a greedy pack,  
They rend and delve and tear  
The very grass from off my back—  
I've scarce a rag to wear.  
140 Gain takes my freedom all away  
Since its dull suit I wore,  
And yet scorn vows I never pay  
And hurts me more and more.

And should the price of grain get high—  
145 Lord help and keep it low—  
I shan't possess a single fly  
Or get a weed to grow;  
I shan't possess a yard of ground  
To bid a mouse to thrive,  
150 For gain has put me in a pound,  
I scarce can keep alive.

I own I'm poor like many more,  
But then the poor mun<sup>o</sup> live,  
And many came for miles before  
155 For what I had to give;

But since I fell upon the town  
They pass me with a sigh;  
I've scarce the room to say sit down  
And so they wander by.

160

Though now I seem so full of clack,<sup>o</sup>  
Yet when yer' riding by  
The very birds upon my back  
Are not more fain to fly.  
I feel so lorn<sup>o</sup> in this disgrace,  
165 God send the grain to fall;  
I am the oldest in the place  
And the worst served of all.

Lord bless ye, I was kind to all,  
And poverty in me  
170 Could always find a humble stall,  
A rest and lodging free.  
Poor bodies with an hungry ass  
I welcomed many a day,  
And gave him tether, room, and grass,  
175 And never said him nay.

There was a time my bit of ground  
Made freemen of the slave;  
The ass no pindar'd<sup>5</sup> dare to pound  
When I his supper gave.  
180 The gypsies' camp was not afraid,  
I made his dwelling free,  
Till vile enclosure came and made  
A parish slave of me.

185 The gypsies further on sojourn,  
No parish bounds they like.  
No sticks I own, and would earth burn,  
I shouldn't own a dyke.

I am no friend to lawless work,  
 Nor would a rebel be,  
 190 And why I call a Christian Turk<sup>6</sup>  
 Is they are Turks to me.

And if I could but find a friend  
 With no deceit to sham,  
 Who'd send me some few sheep to tend,  
 195 And leave me as I am,  
 To keep my hills from cart and plough  
 And strife of mongrel men,  
 And as spring found me find me now,  
 200 I should look up again.

And save his Lordship's woods that past  
 The day of danger dwell,  
 Of all the fields I am the last  
 That my own face can tell.  
 205 Yet what with stone pits' delving holes  
 And strife to buy and sell,  
 My name will quickly be the whole,  
 That's left of Swordy Well.

1832–37

1935

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Located near Clare's native village, Helpston, Swordy Well, also known as Swaddywell, was an ancient stone quarry first used by the Romans. During Clare's youth, waste grounds like these, formerly places where poor families gathered fuel or found pasturage for their cows or horses, were, through acts of Parliament, enclosed—converted to private property and fenced off from the community. As part of this enclosure movement, Swordy Well was handed over to overseers of the parish roads to be used for mending-stone. Clare's poem, unpublished and

untitled during his lifetime, gives this piece of land a voice with which to lament its misfortunes. Swordy Well speaks in the tones of a laboring man who hates how enclosure has made him a charity case.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: That is, people digging for wealth, money-grubbers.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An institution where the able-bodied poor who sought help from the parish were confined and set to work.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Generic term for a stupid person.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A pindar is a person in charge of impounding stray animals.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: An ethnic slur then in common use for a cruel and barbaric person.[Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *poverty*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *country bumpkins*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *torment*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *beat*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *tufts of grass*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *hang*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *blade of grass*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *must*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *chatter*[Return to reference 5](#) °
- °: *forlorn*[Return to reference 5](#) °



## [Mouse's Nest]

I found a ball of grass among the hay  
And progged<sup>o</sup> it as I passed and went away;  
And when I looked I fancied something stirred,  
And turned again and hoped to catch the bird—  
5 When out an old mouse bolted in the wheat  
With all her young ones hanging at her teats;  
She looked so odd and so grotesque to me,  
I ran and wondered what the thing could be,  
And pushed the knapweed<sup>1</sup> bunches where I stood,  
10 When the mouse hurried from the crawling brood.  
The young ones squeaked, and when I went away  
She found her nest again among the hay.  
The water o'er the pebbles scarce could run  
And broad old cesspools<sup>2</sup> glittered in the sun.

1835–37

1935

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A plant with knobs of purple flowers.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Rainwater pools on the surface of a peat bog (a “cess”). In the manuscript Clare in fact spelled this word “sexpools,” perhaps deliberately testing readers’ tolerance.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *prodded*[Return to reference °](#)

## [The Badger]

The badger grunting on his woodland track  
With shaggy hide and sharp nose scrowed<sup>o</sup> with  
black  
Roots in the bushes and the woods, and makes  
A great huge burrow in the ferns and brakes.<sup>o</sup>  
With nose on ground he runs an awkward pace,  
5 And anything will beat him in the race.  
The shepherd's dog will run him to his den  
Followed and hooted by the dogs and men.  
The woodman when the hunting comes about  
Goes round at night to stop the foxes out<sup>1</sup>  
10 And hurrying through the bushes, ferns, and brakes  
Nor sees the many holes the badger makes,  
And often through the bushes to the chin  
Breaks the old holes, and tumbles headlong in.

15 When midnight comes a host of dogs and men  
Go out and track the badger to his den,  
And put a sack within the hole and lie  
Till the old grunting badger passes by.<sup>2</sup>  
He comes and hears—they let the strongest loose.  
The old fox hears the noise<sup>3</sup> and drops the goose.  
20 The poacher shoots and hurries from the cry,  
And the old hare half wounded buzzes by.  
They get a forkèd stick to bear him down  
And clap<sup>o</sup> the dogs and bear him to the town,  
And bait him all the day with many dogs,<sup>4</sup>  
25 And laugh and shout and fright the scampering  
hogs.  
He runs along and bites at all he meets;

They shout and hollo<sup>o</sup> down the noisy streets.

He turns about to face the loud uproar  
And drives the rebels to their very doors.  
30 The frequent stone is hurled where'er they go;  
When badgers fight, and every one's a foe.  
The dogs are clapped and urged to join the fray,  
The badger turns and drives them all away.  
35 Though scarcely half as big, dimute and small,  
He fights with dogs for hours and beats them all.  
The heavy mastiff, savage in the fray,  
Lies down and licks his feet and turns away.  
The bulldog knows his match and waxes cold,  
40 The badger grins and never leaves his hold.  
He drives the crowd and follows at their heels  
And bites them through—the drunkard swears and  
reels.

The frightened women take the boys away,  
The blackguard<sup>o</sup> laughs and hurries on the fray.  
45 He tries to reach the woods, an awkward race,  
But sticks and cudgels quickly stop the chase.  
He turns again and drives the noisy crowd  
And beats the many dogs in noises loud.  
He drives away and beats them every one,  
And then they loose them all and set them on.  
50 He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men,  
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd again,  
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies  
And leaves his hold and cackles, groans, and dies.

55 Some keep a baited badger tame as hog<sup>5</sup>  
And tame him till he follows like the dog.  
They urge him on like dogs and show fair play.  
He beats and scarcely wounded goes away.  
Lapt up as if asleep, he scorns to fly

60 And seizes any dog that ventures nigh.  
Clapped like a dog, he never bites the men,  
But worries dogs and hurries to his den.  
They let him out and turn a barrow<sup>o</sup> down  
And there he fights the host of all the town.  
65 He licks the patting hand, and tries to play  
And never tries to bite or run away,  
And runs away from the noise in hollow trees  
Burnt by the boys to get a swarm of bees.

1832–37

1920

## Endnotes

- Note 1: To ensure that there will be foxes for the hunters to pursue on the day of the hunt, the woodman blocks up, or *stops*, the mouths of the animals' dens the night before.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: By letting loose the dog, the badger hunters mean to force their quarry to bolt into its hole, where it will get entangled in the sack that they have placed there.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In a manuscript on natural history, Clare commented on the horror that a badger's screams—"like those of a woman under the agonys of murder"—could induce in listeners.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In Clare's lifetime, middle- and upper-class commentators were increasingly vocal in their condemnations of badger baiting, a sport in which human beings would set their dogs on a badger and watch the ensuing battle. Parliament in 1835 passed laws that made it a misdemeanor to arrange such fights, doing so in spite of this blood sport's undiminished popularity among men of the rural working class. Fox hunting, a blood sport enjoyed by the aristocracy, was not banned until 2004.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: The baited badger would sometimes be pursued through the village streets by dogs and people, as in lines 29–54, but this concluding sonnet in Clare’s sequence describes an alternative form of baiting, according to David Perkins (*Romanticism and Animal Rights* [2003], p. 168, n. 31). Here a semi-tamed badger is placed in a barrel and various dog owners compete to see whose dog can drag it out. [Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *marked, scratched* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *bracken* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *urge on* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *holler* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *despicable fellow* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *barrel* [Return to reference °](#)

# A Vision

## 1

I lost the love of heaven above;  
I spurn'd the lust of earth below;  
I felt the sweets of fancied love,—  
And hell itself my only foe.

## 2

5 I lost earth's joys but felt the glow  
Of heaven's flame abound in me:  
Till loveliness and I did grow  
The bard of immortality.

## 3

10 I loved, but woman fell away;  
I hid me from her faded fame:  
I snatch'd the sun's eternal ray,—  
And wrote till earth was but a name.

## 4

15 In every language upon earth,  
On every shore, o'er every sea,  
I gave my name immortal birth,  
And kept my spirit with the free.

Aug. 2, 1844

1924

# I Am

## 1

I am—yet what I am, none cares or knows;  
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:—  
I am the self-consumer of my woes;—  
They rise and vanish in oblivion's host,  
Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes:—  
5 And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed

## 2

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,—  
Into the living sea of waking dreams,  
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,  
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;  
10 Even the dearest that I love the best  
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

## 3

I long for scenes where man hath never trod,  
A place where woman never smiled or wept,  
There to abide with my Creator, God,  
15 And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,  
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie,  
The grass below—above, the vaulted sky.

# An Invite to Eternity

## 1

Wilt thou go with me, sweet maid,  
Say maiden, wilt thou go with me  
Through the valley depths of shade,  
Of night and dark obscurity,  
Where the path hath lost its way,  
5 Where the sun forgets the day,  
Where there's nor life nor light to see,  
Sweet maiden, wilt thou go with me?

## 2

Where stones will turn to flooding streams,  
Where plains will rise like ocean waves,  
10 Where life will fade like visioned dreams  
And mountains darken into caves,  
Say maiden, wilt thou go with me  
Through this sad non-identity,  
Where parents live and are forgot  
15 And sisters live and know us not?

## 3

Say maiden, wilt thou go with me  
In this strange death of life to be,  
To live in death and be the same  
Without this life, or home, or name,  
20 At once to be and not to be,  
That was and is not—yet to see



Things pass like shadows—and the sky  
Above, below, around us lie?

**4**

25     The land of shadows wilt thou trace  
       And look—nor know each other's face,  
       The present mixed with reasons gone  
       And past and present all as one?  
       Say maiden, can thy life be led  
30     To join the living with the dead?  
       Then trace thy footsteps on with me—  
       We're wed to one eternity.

1847

1848

# Clock a Clay<sup>1</sup>

## 1

In the cowslip's peeps I lie,<sup>2</sup>  
Hidden from the buzzing fly,  
While green grass beneath me lies,  
Pearled wi' dew like fishes' eyes;  
5 Here I lie, a Clock a Clay,  
Waiting for the time o' day.

## 2

While grassy forests quake surprise,  
And the wild wind sobs and sighs,  
My gold home rocks as like to fall  
10 On its pillars green and tall;  
When the pattering rain drives by  
Clock a Clay keeps warm and dry.

## 3

Day by day and night by night,  
All the week I hide from sight;  
15 In the cowslip's peeps I lie,  
In rain and dew still warm and dry;  
Day and night and night and day,  
Red black-spotted Clock a Clay.

## 4

My home it shakes in wind and showers,

20

Pale green pillar topped wi' flowers,  
Bending at the wild wind's breath,  
Till I touch the grass beneath;  
Here still I live, lone Clock a Clay,  
Watching for the time of day.

ca. 1848

1873

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The ladybird, or ladybug. The sixth and last lines allude to the children's game of telling the hour by the number of taps it takes to make the ladybird fly away home. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Compare the opening lines of Ariel's song in act 5 of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "Where the bee sucks, there suck I: / In a cowslip's bell I lie." "Cowslip": a yellow primrose. "Peeps": pips—single blossoms of flowers growing in a cluster. [Return to reference 2](#)

# The Peasant Poet

He loved the brook's soft sound,  
The swallow swimming by;  
He loved the daisy-covered ground,  
The cloud-bedappled sky.  
5 To him the dismal storm appeared  
The very voice of God,  
And where the evening rack<sup>o</sup> was reared  
Stood Moses with his rod.  
And everything his eyes surveyed,  
10 The insects i' the brake,  
Were creatures God Almighty made—  
He loved them for his sake:  
A silent man in life's affairs,  
A thinker from a boy,  
15 A peasant in his daily cares—  
The poet in his joy.

1842–64

1920

## Notes

- <sup>o</sup>: *mass of clouds*[Return to reference <sup>o</sup>](#)

# FELICIA DOROTHEA HEMANS

## 1793–1835

Born in Liverpool and brought up in Wales, Felicia Hemans published her first two volumes—*Poems* and *England and Spain, or Valour and Patriotism*—when she was fifteen. She followed these four years later with *The Domestic Affections and Other Poems* (1812) and from 1816 on into the 1830s produced new books of poetry almost annually: short sentimental lyrics, tales and “historic scenes,” translations, songs for music, sketches of women, hymns for children. She also published literary criticism in magazines and wrote three plays. Her work was widely read, anthologized, memorized, and set to music throughout the nineteenth century and was especially popular and influential in the United States, where the first of many collected editions of her poems appeared in 1825. When she died she was eulogized by many poets, including William Wordsworth, Letitia Landon, and Elizabeth Barrett—a sign of the high regard in which she was held by her contemporaries.

A tablet erected by her brothers in the cathedral of St. Asaph, in north Wales, reads in part, “In memory of Felicia Hemans, whose character is best portrayed in her writings.” But there are several characters in her poems, and some of them seem not entirely compatible with some of the others. She is frequently thought of as the poet (in the nineteenth century as “the poetess”) of domestic affections, at the center of a cult of domesticity in which the home is conceptualized as a haven apart from the stresses of the public

world, to which only men are suited. Her poems have been viewed as celebrations of a feminine ethic founded on women's—especially mothers'—capacities for forbearance, piety, and long suffering. Among her most popular pieces in this vein, "Evening Prayer, at a Girls' School" depicts the happy ignorance of schoolgirls whose enjoyment of life will end when they reach womanhood, and "Indian Woman's Death-Song" is the lament of a Native American woman whose husband has abandoned her, sung as she plunges in her canoe over a cataract to suicide with an infant in her arms.

Many of Hemans's longer narratives, by contrast, recount the exploits of women warriors who, to avenge personal, family, or national injustice or insult, destroy enemies in a manner not conventionally associated with female behavior. In *The Widow of Crescentius*, Stephania stalks and poisons the German emperor Otho, the murderer of her husband; in "The Wife of Asdrubal," a mother publicly kills her own children and herself to show contempt for her husband, a betrayer of the Carthaginians whom he governed; the heroine of "The Bride of the Greek Isle," boarding the ship of the pirates who have killed her husband, annihilates them (and herself) in a conflagration rivaling the monumental explosion described in "Casabianca." Among the numerous themes of her work, patriotism and military action recur frequently; there may be a biographical basis for these motifs, given that her two oldest brothers distinguished themselves in the Peninsular War and her military husband (who deserted her and their five sons in 1818) had also served in Spain. But some of her most famous patriotic and military poems are now being viewed as critiques of the virtues and ideologies they had been thought by earlier readers to inculcate. "The Homes of England," for example, has been read as both asserting and undermining the idea that all homes are equal, ancestral estates and cottages alike; and in "Casabianca," the boy's automatic steadfastness has been interpreted as empty obedience rather than admirable loyalty.

Hemans was the highest paid writer in *Blackwood's Magazine* during her day. Her books sold more copies than those of any other

contemporary poet except Byron and Walter Scott. She was a shrewd calculator of the literary marketplace and a genius in her negotiations with publishers (which she carried on entirely through the mails). Her self-abasing women of the domestic affections and her scimitar-wielding superwomen of the revenge narratives exist side by side throughout her works. These and other seeming dissonances clearly enhanced the strong appeal of her poems to a wide range of readers, men as well as women.

# England's Dead

Son of the ocean isle!  
Where sleep your mighty dead?  
Show me what high and stately pile  
Is rear'd o'er Glory's bed.

5        Go, stranger! track the deep,  
Free, free the white sail spread!  
Wave may not foam, nor wild wind sweep,  
Where rest not England's dead.

10       On Egypt's burning plains,  
By the pyramid o'ersway'd,  
With fearful power the noonday reigns,  
And the palm trees yield no shade.<sup>1</sup>

15       But let the angry sun  
From heaven look fiercely red,  
Unfelt by those whose task is done!—  
*There* slumber England's dead.

20       The hurricane hath might  
Along the Indian shore,  
And far by Ganges' banks at night,  
Is heard the tiger's roar.

But let the sound roll on!  
It hath no tone of dread,  
For those that from their toils are gone;—  
*There* slumber England's dead.

Loud rush the torrent floods  
The western wilds among,



And free, in green Columbia's woods,  
25       The hunter's bow is strung.

But let the floods rush on!  
Let the arrow's flight be sped!  
30       Why should *they* reckon whose task is done?—  
      *There* slumber England's dead!

The mountain storms rise high  
In the snowy Pyrenees,  
35       And toss the pine boughs through the sky,  
      Like rose leaves on the breeze.

But let the storm rage on!  
Let the fresh wreaths be shed!  
For the Roncesvalles' field<sup>2</sup> is won,—  
40       *There* slumber England's dead.

On the frozen deep's repose  
'Tis a dark and dreadful hour,  
When round the ship the ice-fields close,  
And the northern night clouds lower.

But let the ice drift on!  
45       Let the cold-blue desert spread!  
      *Their* course with mast and flag is done,—  
      Even there sleep England's dead.

The warlike of the isles,  
The men of field and wave!  
50       Are not the rocks their funeral piles,  
      The seas and shores their grave?

Go, stranger! track the deep,  
Free, free the white sail spread!  
Wave may not foam, nor wild wind sweep,  
Where rest not England's dead.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: English forces defeated the French at Alexandria in the spring of 1801. The rest of the references—to 18th- and early 19th-century battles in India (lines 17–24), America (lines 25–32), Spain (lines 33–40), and on the sea (lines 41–48)—are more general.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Roncesvalles, the mountain pass in the Pyrenees between France and Spain, was a scene of action during the Peninsular War (1808–14).[Return to reference 2](#)

# Casabianca<sup>1</sup>

The boy stood on the burning deck  
Whence all but he had fled;  
The flame that lit the battle's wreck  
Shone round him o'er the dead.

5 Yet beautiful and bright he stood,  
As born to rule the storm;  
A creature of heroic blood,  
A proud, though childlike form.

10 The flames roll'd on—he would not go  
Without his Father's word;  
That Father, faint in death below,  
His voice no longer heard.

15 He call'd aloud:—"Say, Father, say  
If yet my task is done?"  
He knew not that the chieftain lay  
Unconscious of his son.

"Speak, Father!" once again he cried,  
"If I may yet be gone!  
And"—but the booming shots replied,  
20 And fast the flames roll'd on.

Upon his brow he felt their breath,  
And in his waving hair,  
And look'd from that lone post of death  
In still, yet brave despair.

And shouted but once more aloud,  
"My Father! must I stay?"

25           While o'er him fast, through sail and shroud,  
              The wreathing fires made way.

30           They wrapt the ship in splendour wild,  
              They caught the flag on high,  
          And stream'd above the gallant child,  
              Like banners in the sky.

35           There came a burst of thunder sound—  
              The boy—oh! where was he?  
          Ask of the winds that far around  
              With fragments strew'd the sea!—

40           With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,  
              That well had borne their part,  
          But the noblest thing which perish'd there  
              Was that young faithful heart!

1826

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Young Casabianca, a boy about thirteen years old, son to the Admiral of the *Orient*, remained at his post (in the Battle of the Nile) after the ship had taken fire, and all the guns had been abandoned; and perished in the explosion of the vessel, when the flames had reached the powder [*Hemans's note*]. The Battle of the Nile, in which Nelson captured and destroyed the French fleet in Aboukir Bay, took place on August 1, 1798. Admiral Casabianca and his son (who was in fact only ten) were among those killed by the British forces.[Return to reference 1](#)

# Corinne at the Capitol<sup>1</sup>

Les femmes doivent penser qu'il est dans cette carrière bien peu de sorte qui puissent valoir la plus obscure vie d'une femme aimée et d'une mère heureuse.

MADAME DE STAEL<sup>2</sup>

Daughter of th' Italian heaven!  
Thou, to whom its fires are given,  
Joyously thy car<sup>o</sup> hath roll'd  
Where the conqueror's pass'd of old;  
5 And the festal sun that shone,  
O'er three<sup>3</sup> hundred triumphs gone,  
Makes thy day of glory bright,  
With a shower of golden light.

Now thou tread'st th'ascending road,  
Freedom's foot so proudly trode;  
10 While, from tombs of heroes borne,  
From the dust of empire shorn,  
Flowers upon thy graceful head,  
Chaplets<sup>o</sup> of all hues, are shed,  
15 In a soft and rosy rain,  
Touch'd with many a gemlike stain.

Thou hast gain'd the summit now!  
Music hails thee from below;—  
Music, whose rich notes might stir  
20 Ashes of the sepulchre;  
Shaking with victorious notes  
All the bright air as it floats.  
Well may woman's heart beat high

Unto that proud harmony!

25 Now afar it rolls—it dies—  
And thy voice is heard to rise  
With a low and lovely tone  
In its thrilling power alone;  
And thy lyre's deep silvery string,  
30 Touch'd as by a breeze's wing,  
Murmurs tremblingly at first,  
Ere the tide of rapture burst.

All the spirit of thy sky  
Now hath lit thy large dark eye,  
And thy cheek a flush hath caught  
35 From the joy of kindled thought;  
And the burning words of song  
From thy lip flow fast and strong,  
With a rushing stream's delight  
In the freedom of its might.  
40

Radiant daughter of the sun!  
Now thy living wreath is won.  
Crown'd of Rome!—Oh! art thou not  
Happy in that glorious lot?—  
Happier, happier far than thou,  
45 With the laurel<sup>4</sup> on thy brow,  
She that makes the humblest hearth  
Lovely but to one on earth!

1827

## Endnotes

1827

- Note 1:  
Hemans's poem comments on one of the most famous and controversial novels of early 19th-century Europe, *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), by the Swiss-French writer Germaine de Staël, an particularly on its second book, in which Staël's heroine, an

*improvisatrice* (a poet who speaks from rhapsodic inspiration rather than texts), is crowned at the Capitol in Rome in recognition of her genius, as Petrarch had been crowned in the 14th century. Corinne's triumph is short-lived, and at the novel's close, abandoned by her Scottish lover, she dies of a broken heart. Hemans confessed in a letter that some passages in *Corinne* "seem to give me back my own thoughts and feelings,

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: "Women must recognize that very little in this career equals in value the most obscure life of a beloved wife and happy mother." From Staël's *De l'Influence des Passions sur le Bonheur des Individus et des Nations* (*On the Influence of the Passions on the Happiness of Individuals and Nations*; 1796).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The trebly hundred triumphs—BYRON [*Hemans's note*]. From a stinging account in *Childe Harold* (4.731) of the celebrations that greeted imperial Rome's victorious heroes.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Wreaths of laurel were bestowed on honored poets in classical antiquity.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *chariot*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wreaths*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Homes of England

Where's the coward that would not dare  
To fight for such a land?

—*Marmion*<sup>1</sup>

The stately Homes of England,  
How beautiful they stand!  
Amidst their tall ancestral trees,  
O'er all the pleasant land.  
5 The deer across their greensward bound  
Through shade and sunny gleam,  
And the swan glides past them with the sound  
Of some rejoicing stream.

The merry Homes of England!  
Around their hearths by night,  
10 What gladsome looks of household love  
Meet in the ruddy light!  
There woman's voice flows forth in song,  
Or childhood's tale is told,  
Or lips move tunefully along  
15 Some glorious page of old.

The blessed Homes of England!  
How softly on their bowers  
Is laid the holy quietness  
That breathes from Sabbath-hours!  
20 Solemn, yet sweet, the church-bell's chime  
Floats through their woods at morn;  
All other sounds, in that still time,



Of breeze and leaf are born.

25     The Cottage Homes of England!  
      By thousands on her plains,  
      They are smiling o'er the silvery brooks,  
      And round the hamlet-fanes.<sup>o</sup>  
      Through glowing orchards forth they peep,  
      Each from its nook of leaves,  
30     And fearless there the lowly sleep,  
      As the bird beneath their eaves.

      The free, fair Homes of England!  
      Long, long, in hut and hall,  
      May hearts of native proof be rear'd  
35     To guard each hallow'd wall!  
      And green for ever be the groves,  
      And bright the flowery sod,  
      Where first the child's glad spirit loves  
40     Its country and its God!

1827

## Endnotes

- Note 1: From Sir Walter Scott's long poem *Marmion* (1808), 4.633–34, a tale of betrayal and bloody conflict between the English and the Scots. When she first published the poem, in *Blackwood's*, April 1827, Hemans used as epigraph a passage from the work of another Scottish author, Joanna Baillie's *Ethwald: A Tragedy*, part 2 (1802), 1.2.76–82.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- <sup>o</sup>: village churches[Return to reference <sup>o</sup>](#)

## Properzia Rossi

Properzia Rossi, a celebrated female sculptor of Bologna, possessed also of talents for poetry and music, died in consequence of an unrequited attachment.—A painting by Ducis represents her showing her last work, a basso-relievo of Ariadne, to a Roman Knight, the object of her affection, who regards it with indifference.<sup>1</sup>

—————Tell me no more, no more  
Of my soul's lofty gifts! Are they not vain  
To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?  
Have I not lov'd, and striven, and fail'd to bind  
One true heart unto me, whereon my own  
Might find a resting-place, a home for all  
Its burden of affections? I depart,  
Unknown, tho' Fame goes with me; I must leave  
The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death  
Shall give my name a power to win such tears  
As would have made life precious.<sup>2</sup>

### I

5 One dream of passion and of beauty more!  
And in its bright fulfilment let me pour  
My soul away! Let earth retain a trace  
Of that which lit my being, tho' its race  
Might have been loftier far.—Yet one more dream!  
From my deep spirit one victorious gleam  
Ere I depart! For thee alone, for thee!  
May this last work, this farewell triumph be,  
Thou, lov'd so vainly! I would leave enshrined  
Something immortal of my heart and mind,  
That yet may speak to thee when I am gone,

10 Shaking thine inmost bosom with a tone  
Of lost affection;—something that may prove  
What she hath been, whose melancholy love  
On thee was lavish'd; silent pang and tear,  
15 And fervent song, that gush'd when none were near,  
And dream by night, and weary thought by day,  
Stealing the brightness from her life away,—  
While thou——Awake! not yet within me die.  
Under the burden and the agony  
20 Of this vain tenderness,—my spirit, wake!  
Ev'n for thy sorrowful affection's sake,  
Live! in thy work breathe out!—that he may yet,  
Feeling sad mastery there, perchance regret  
Thine unrequited gift.  
25

## II

It comes,—the power  
Within me born, flows back; my fruitless dower<sup>o</sup>  
That could not win me love. Yet once again  
I greet it proudly, with its rushing train  
Of glorious images:—they throng—they press—  
30 A sudden joy lights up my loneliness,—  
I shall not perish all!

The bright work grows  
Beneath my hand, unfolding, as a rose,  
Leaf after leaf, to beauty; line by line,  
35 I fix my thought, heart, soul, to burn, to shine,  
Thro' the pale marble's veins. It grows—and now  
I give my own life's history to thy brow,  
Forsaken Ariadne!<sup>3</sup> thou shalt wear  
My form, my lineaments; but oh! more fair,  
40 Touch'd into lovelier being by the glow  
Which in me dwells, as by the summer-light  
All things are glorified. From thee my woe  
Shall yet look beautiful to meet his sight,

45 When I am pass'd away. Thou art the mould  
Wherein I pour the fervent thoughts, th' untold,  
The self-consuming! Speak to him of me,  
Thou, the deserted by the lonely sea,  
With the soft sadness of thine earnest eye,  
50 Speak to him, lorn<sup>o</sup> one, deeply, mournfully,  
Of all my love and grief! Oh! could I throw  
Into thy frame a voice, a sweet, and low,  
And thrilling voice of song! when he came nigh,  
To send the passion of its melody  
55 Thro' his pierced bosom—on its tones to bear  
My life's deep feeling, as the southern air  
Wafts the faint myrtle's breath,—to rise, to swell,  
To sink away in accents of farewell,  
Winning but one, *one* gush of tears, whose flow  
60 Surely my parted spirit yet might know,  
If love be strong as death!

### III

Now fair thou art,  
Thou form, whose life is of my burning heart!  
Yet all the vision that within me wrought,  
65 I cannot make thee! Oh! I might have given  
Birth to creations of far nobler thought,  
I might have kindled, with the fire of heaven,  
Things not of such as die! But I have been  
Too much alone; a heart, whereon to lean,  
70 With all these deep affections that o'erflow  
My aching soul, and find no shore below;  
An eye to be my star, a voice to bring  
Hope o'er my path, like sounds that breathe of  
spring,  
These are denied me—dreamt of still in vain,—  
75 Therefore my brief aspirings from the chain,  
Are ever but as some wild fitful song,

Rising triumphantly, to die ere long  
In dirge-like echoes.

#### IV

Yet the world will see  
Little of this, my parting work, in thee,  
80     Thou shalt have fame! Oh, mockery! give the reed  
From storms a shelter,—give the drooping vine  
Something round which its tendrils may entwine,—  
Give the parch'd flower a rain-drop, and the  
meed<sup>o</sup>  
Of love's kind words to woman! Worthless fame!  
85     That in *his* bosom wins not for my name  
Th' abiding place it asked! Yet how my heart,  
In its own fairy world of song and art,  
Once beat for praise!—Are those high longings o'er?  
That which I have been can I be no more?—  
90     Never, oh! never more; tho' still thy sky  
Be blue as then, my glorious Italy!  
And tho' the music, whose rich breathings fill  
Thine air with soul, be wandering past me still,  
And tho' the mantle of thy sunlight streams  
95     Unchang'd on forms instinct with<sup>o</sup> poet-dreams;  
Never, oh! never more! Where'er I move,  
The shadow of this broken-hearted love  
Is on me and around! Too well *they* know,  
Whose life is all within, too soon and well,  
100     When there the blight hath settled;—but I go  
Under the silent wings of Peace to dwell;  
From the slow wasting, from the lonely pain,  
The inward burning of those words—“*in vain,*”  
Sear'd on the heart—I go. 'Twill soon be past.  
105     Sunshine, and song, and bright Italian heaven,  
And thou, oh! thou, on whom my spirit cast  
Unvalued wealth,—who know'st not what was given

In that devotedness,—the sad, and deep,  
 And unrepaid—farewell! If I could weep  
 110 Once, only once, belov'd one! on thy breast,  
 Pouring my heart forth ere I sink to rest!  
 But that were happiness, and unto me  
 Earth's gift is *fame*. Yet I was form'd to be  
 So richly blest! With thee to watch the sky,  
 115 Speaking not, feeling but that thou wert nigh;  
 With thee to listen, while the tones of song  
 Swept ev'n as part of our sweet air along,  
 To listen silently;—with thee to gaze  
 On forms, the deified of olden days,—  
 120 This had been joy enough;—and hour by hour,  
 From its glad well-springs drinking life and power,  
 How had my spirit soar'd, and made its fame  
     A glory for thy brow!—Dreams, dreams!—the fire  
 Burns faint within me. Yet I leave my name—  
 125 As a deep thrill<sup>o</sup> may linger on the lyre  
 When its full chords are hush'd—awhile to live,  
 And one day haply in thy heart revive  
 Sad thoughts of me:—I leave it, with a sound,  
 A spell o'er memory, mournfully profound,  
 130 I leave it, on my country's air to dwell,—  
 Say proudly yet—" *'Twas hers who lov'd me well!*"  
 1828

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Establishing her poem's connection to a tradition of ecphrastic verse, Hemans's initial note refers to two visual artists: Properzia de Rossi (ca. 1490–1530), the female sculptor active in early 16th-century Italy, whose life was recounted in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550; 2nd ed., 1568); and Louis Ducis (1775–1847), the French painter who between 1818 and 1822 had exhibited at the Louvre a series of allegorical

paintings representing the various arts “under the influence of love.” The painting that Ducis devotes to the art of sculpture depicts Properzia de Rossi as she unveils her bas-relief sculpture of Ariadne to a man in Renaissance dress. He has that man regard her work, or perhaps Properzia herself, with evident admiration, however. The “indifference” that Hemans mentions in this note is her addition.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The blank verse epigraph is by Hemans.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In Greek mythology, Ariadne, daughter of King Minos of Crete, in love with the Greek prince Theseus, helped Theseus defeat the monstrous Minotaur by teaching him how to find his way out of the labyrinth in which he had been imprisoned as a sacrifice to the monster. Theseus married Ariadne, but then deserted her on the island of Naxos, where, in some versions of the myth, she pined away.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *gift*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *forlorn*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *reward*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *animated by*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *vibration*[Return to reference °](#)

# Indian Woman's Death Song

An Indian woman, driven to despair by her husband's desertion of her for another wife, entered a canoe with her children, and rowed it down the Mississippi towards a cataract. Her voice was heard from the shore singing a mournful death-song, until overpowered by the sound of the waters in which she perished. The tale is related in Long's *Expedition to the Source of St Peter's River*.<sup>1</sup>

*Non, je ne puis vivre avec un coeur brisé. Il faut que je retrouve la joie, et que je m'unisse aux esprits libres de l'air.*

*Bride of Messina*, Translated by Madame de Staël<sup>2</sup>

*Let not my child be a girl, for very sad is the life of a woman.*

*The Prairie*<sup>3</sup>

Down a broad river of the western wilds,  
Piercing thick forest glooms, a light canoe  
Swept with the current: fearful was the speed  
Of the frail bark, as by a tempest's wing  
5 Borne leaf-like on to where the mist of spray  
Rose with the cataract's thunder.—Yet within,  
Proudly, and dauntlessly, and all alone,  
Save that a babe lay sleeping at her breast,  
A woman stood: upon her Indian brow  
Sat a strange gladness, and her dark hair wav'd  
10 As if triumphantly. She press'd her child,  
In its bright slumber, to her beating heart,  
And lifted her sweet voice, that rose awhile  
Above the sound of waters, high and clear,  
Wafting a wild proud strain, her song of death.



15      Roll swiftly to the Spirit's land, thou mighty stream  
         and free!  
         Father of ancient waters,<sup>4</sup> roll! and bear our lives  
         with thee!  
         The weary bird that storms have toss'd, would seek  
         the sunshine's calm,  
         And the deer that hath the arrow's hurt, flies to the  
         woods of balm.

20      Roll on!—my warrior's eye hath look'd upon  
         another's face,  
         And mine hath faded from his soul, as fades a  
         moonbeam's trace;  
         My shadow comes not o'er his path, my whisper to  
         his dream,  
         He flings away the broken reed—roll swifter yet,  
         thou stream!

         The voice that spoke of other days is hush'd within  
         *his* breast,  
25      But *mine* its lonely music haunts, and will not let me  
         rest;  
         It sings a low and mournful song of gladness that is  
         gone,  
         I cannot live without that light—Father of waves! roll  
         on!

         Will he not miss the bounding step that met him  
         from the chase?<sup>o</sup>  
         The heart of love that made his home an ever sunny  
         place?

30      The hand that spread the hunter's board, and deck'd  
         his couch of yore?—  
         He will not!—roll, dark foaming stream, on to the  
         better shore!

Some blessed fount amidst the woods of that bright  
land must flow,  
Whose waters from my soul may lave the memory of  
this woe;  
Some gentle wind must whisper there, whose breath  
may waft away  
The burden of the heavy night, the sadness of the  
day.

And thou, my babe! tho' born, like me, for woman's  
weary lot,  
Smile!—to that wasting of the heart, my own! I leave  
thee not;  
Too bright a thing art *thou* to pine in aching love  
away,  
Thy mother bears thee far, young Fawn! from sorrow  
and decay.

She bears thee to the glorious bowers where none  
are heard to weep,  
And where th' unkind one hath no power again to  
trouble sleep;  
And where the soul shall find its youth, as wakening  
from a dream,—  
One moment, and that realm is ours—On, on, dark  
rolling stream!

1828

## Endnotes

- Note 1: William Hippolytus Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River* (1824), which compiles notes taken by Stephen Harriman Long and other members of an 1823 expedition that traveled up the Minnesota River (then

called St. Peter's River) to the northern Great Plains.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: "No, I cannot live with a broken heart. I must regain joy and join the free spirits of the air": Staël cites Friedrich Schiller's tragedy *The Bride of Messina*, which she discusses in her book on German culture, *Germany* (1810).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: From the last of James Fenimore Cooper's series of Leatherstocking novels, *The Prairie* (1827), spoken by a Sioux woman.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: "Father of waters," the Indian name for the Mississippi [*Hemans's note*].[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *hunt*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England

Look now abroad—another race has fill'd  
Those populous borders—wide the wood recedes,  
And towns shoot up, and fertile realms are till'd;  
The land is full of harvests and green meads.

—BRYANT<sup>1</sup>

The breaking waves dash'd high  
On a stern and rock-bound coast,  
And the woods against a stormy sky  
Their giant branches toss'd;

5 And the heavy night hung dark,  
The hills and waters o'er,  
When a band of exiles moor'd their bark  
On the wild New England shore.

10 Not as the conqueror comes,  
They, the true-hearted, came;  
Not with the roll of the stirring drums,  
And the trumpet that sings of fame;

15 Not as the flying come,  
In silence and in fear;—  
They shook the depths of the desert<sup>o</sup> gloom  
With their hymns of lofty cheer.

Amidst the storm they sang,  
And the stars heard and the sea;  
And the sounding aisles of the dim woods rang  
To the anthem of the free!

20      The ocean eagle soar'd  
             From his nest by the white wave's foam;  
             And the rocking pines of the forest roar'd—  
             This was their welcome home!

25      There were men with hoary<sup>o</sup> hair  
             Amidst that pilgrim band;—  
             Why had *they* come to wither there,  
             Away from their childhood's land?

30      There was woman's fearless eye,  
             Lit by her deep love's truth;  
             There was manhood's brow serenely high,  
             And the fiery heart of youth.

35      What sought they thus afar?  
             Bright jewels of the mine?  
             The wealth of seas, the spoils of war?—  
             They sought a faith's pure shrine!

40      Aye, call it holy ground,  
             The soil where first they trod!  
             They have left unstain'd what there they found—  
             Freedom to worship God.

1825, 1828

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The American poet William Cullen Bryant, *The Ages* (1821), lines 280–83. Hemans's title echoes another American text, the widely reprinted *Discourse, Delivered at Plymouth, Dec. 22, 1820*, by politician and orator Daniel Webster (1782–1852), commemorating the 200th anniversary of the founding of Plymouth Colony.[Return to reference 1](#)

# Notes

- °: *desolate*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *white*[Return to reference](#) °

## The Image in Lava<sup>1</sup>

Thou thing of years departed!  
What ages have gone by,  
Since here the mournful seal was set  
By love and agony!

5 Temple and tower have moulder'd,  
Empires from earth have pass'd,—  
And woman's heart hath left a trace  
Those glories to outlast!

10 And childhood's fragile image  
Thus fearfully enshrin'd,  
Survives the proud memorials rear'd  
By conquerors of mankind.

15 Babe! wert thou brightly slumbering  
Upon thy mother's breast,  
When suddenly the fiery tomb  
Shut round each gentle guest?

20 A strange dark fate o'ertook you,  
Fair babe and loving heart!  
One moment of a thousand pangs—  
Yet better than to part!

Haply of that fond bosom,  
On ashes here impress'd,  
Thou wert the only treasure, child!  
Whereon a hope might rest.

Perchance all vainly lavish'd,  
Its other love had been,

25           And where it trusted, nought remain'd  
              But thorns on which to lean.

30           Far better then to perish,  
              Thy form within its clasp,  
              Than live and lose thee, precious one!  
              From that impassion'd grasp.

35           Oh! I could pass all relics  
              Left by the pomps of old,  
              To gaze on this rude monument,  
              Cast in affection's mould.

40           Love, human love! what art thou?  
              Thy print upon the dust  
              Outlives the cities of renown  
              Wherein the mighty trust!

              Immortal, oh! immortal  
              Thou art, whose earthly glow  
              Hath given these ashes holiness—  
              It must, it *must* be so!

1827, 1828

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The impression of a woman's form, with an infant clasped to the bosom, found at the uncovering of Herculaneum [*Hemans's note*]. When the poem was first printed in 1827 in the *New Monthly Magazine* this note referenced not Herculaneum but Pompeii; Paula Feldman, Hemans's modern editor, proposes in fact that the "image" the poem addresses recalls the petrified skeletons of a mother and child unearthed in Pompeii in 1812. Both these Roman towns, buried (mainly under volcanic ash, not lava) by the catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius in 79 C.E., had been lost to history until brought back to



light by 18th- and 19th-century archaeology.[Return to reference](#)  
[1](#)

# A Spirit's Return

"This is to be a mortal,  
And seek the things beyond mortality!"

—MANFRED<sup>1</sup>

5 Thy voice prevails—dear friend, my gentle friend!  
This long-shut heart for thee shall be unsealed,  
And though thy soft eye mournfully will bend  
Over the troubled stream, yet once revealed  
Shall its freed waters flow; then rocks must close  
For evermore, above their dark repose.

Come while the gorgeous mysteries of the sky  
Fused in the crimson sea of sunset lie;  
Come to the woods, where all strange wandering  
sound  
Is mingled into harmony profound;  
10 Where the leaves thrill with spirit, while the wind  
Fills with a viewless<sup>o</sup> being, unconfined,  
The trembling reeds and fountains—our own dell,  
With its green dimness and Aeolian<sup>o</sup> breath,  
Shall suit th' unveiling of dark records well—  
15 Hear me in tenderness and silent faith!

Thou knew'st me not in life's fresh vernal morn—  
I would thou hadst!—for then my heart on thine  
Had poured a worthier love; now, all o'erworn  
By its deep thirst for something too divine,  
20 It hath but fitful music to bestow,  
Echoes of harp-strings broken long ago.

Yet even in youth companionless I stood,

As a lone forest-bird 'midst ocean's foam;  
For me the silver cords of brotherhood  
25 Were early loosed; the voices from my home  
Passed one by one and melody and mirth  
Left me a dreamer by a silent hearth.

But, with the fulness of a heart that burned  
For the deep sympathies of mind, I turned  
30 From that unanswering spot, and fondly sought  
In all wild scenes with thrilling murmurs fraught,  
In every still small voice and sound of power,  
And flute-note of the wind through cave and bower,  
A perilous delight!—for then first woke  
35 My life's lone passion, the mysterious quest  
Of secret knowledge; and each tone that broke  
From the wood-arches or the fountain's breast,  
Making my quick soul vibrate as a lyre,  
But ministered to that strange inborn fire.  
40 'Midst the bright silence of the mountain dells,  
In noon-tide hours or golden summer-eves,  
My thoughts have burst forth as a gale that swells  
Into a rushing blast, and from the leaves  
Shakes out response. O thou rich world unseen!  
45 Thou curtained realm of spirits!—thus my cry  
Hath troubled air and silence—dost thou lie  
Spread all around, yet by some filmy screen  
Shut from us ever? The resounding woods,  
Do their depths teem with marvels?—and the floods,  
50 And the pure fountains, leading secret veins  
Of quenchless melody through rock and hill,  
Have they bright dwellers?—are their lone domains  
Peopled with beauty, which may never still  
*Our* weary thirst of soul?—Cold, weak and cold,  
55 Is earth's vain language, piercing not one fold  
Of our deep being! Oh, for gifts more high!  
For a seer's glance to rend mortality!

For a charmed rod, to call from each dark shrine  
The oracles divine!

60

I woke from those high fantasies, to know  
My kindred with the earth—I woke to love:  
O gentle friend! to love in doubt and woe,  
Shutting the heart the worshipped name above,  
Is to love deeply—and *my* spirit's dower  
65 Was a sad gift, a melancholy power  
Of so adoring—with a buried care,  
And with the o'erflowing of a voiceless prayer,  
And with a deepening dream, that day by day,  
In the still shadow of its lonely sway,  
70 Folded me closer, till the world held nought  
Save the *one* being to my centred thought.

There was no music but his voice to hear,  
No joy but such as with *his* step drew near;  
Light was but where he looked—life where he  
75 moved;

Silently, fervently, thus, thus I loved.  
Oh! but such love is fearful!—and I knew  
Its gathering doom:—the soul's prophetic sight  
Even then unfolded in my breast, and threw  
O'er all things round a full, strong, vivid light,  
80 Too sorrowfully clear!—an undertone  
Was given to Nature's harp, for me alone  
Whispering of grief.—Of grief?—be strong, awake,  
Hath not thy love been victory, O, my soul?  
Hath not its conflict won a voice to shake  
85 Death's fastnesses?—a magic to control  
Worlds far removed?—from o'er the grave to thee  
Love hath made answer; and *thy* tale should be  
Sung like a lay of triumph!—Now return,  
90 And take thy treasure from its bosomed urn,<sup>2</sup>  
And lift it once to light!

In fear, in pain,  
I said I loved—but yet a heavenly strain  
Of sweetness floated down the tearful stream,  
A joy flashed through the trouble of my dream!  
I knew myself beloved!—we breathed no vow,  
95 No mingling visions might our fate allow,  
As unto happy hearts; but still and deep,  
Like a rich jewel gleaming in a grave,  
Like golden sand in some dark river's wave,  
So did my soul that costly knowledge keep  
100 So jealously!—a thing o'er which to shed,  
When stars alone beheld the drooping head,  
Lone tears! yet oftentimes burdened with the excess  
Of our strange nature's quivering happiness.

But, oh! sweet friend! we dream not of love's might  
105 Till death has robed with soft and solemn light  
The image we enshrine!—Before *that* hour,  
We have but glimpses of the o'ermastering power  
Within us laid!—*then* doth the spirit-flame  
With sword-like lightning rend its mortal frame;  
110 The wings of that which pants to follow fast  
Shake their clay-bars, as with a prisoned blast—  
The sea is in our souls!

He died—*he* died  
On whom my lone devotedness was cast!  
I might not keep one vigil by his side,  
115 *I*, whose wrung heart watched with him to the last!  
I might not once his fainting head sustain,  
Nor bathe his parched lips in the hour of pain,  
Nor say to him, "Farewell!"—He passed away—  
Oh! had *my* love been there, its conquering sway  
120 Had won him back from death! but thus removed,  
Borne o'er the abyss no sounding-line hath proved,

Joined with the unknown, the viewless—he became  
Unto my thoughts another, yet the same—  
Changed—hallowed—glorified!—and his low grave  
125 Seemed a bright mournful altar—mine, all mine:—  
Brother and friend soon left me *that* sole shrine,  
The birthright of the faithful!—*their* world's wave  
Soon swept them from its brink.—Oh! deem thou not  
That on the sad and consecrated spot  
130 My soul grew weak!—I tell thee that a power  
There kindled heart and lip—a fiery shower  
My words were made—a might was given to prayer,  
And a strong grasp to passionate despair,  
And a dead triumph!—Know'st thou what I sought?  
135 For what high boon my struggling spirit wrought?—  
Communion with the dead!—I sent a cry,  
Through the veiled empires of eternity,  
A voice to cleave them! By the mournful truth,  
By the lost promise of my blighted youth,  
140 By the strong chain a mighty love can bind  
On the beloved, the spell of mind o'er mind;  
By words, which in themselves are magic high,  
Armed and inspired, and winged with agony;  
By tears, which comfort not, but burn, and seem  
145 To bear the heart's blood in their passion stream;  
I summoned, I adjured!—o—with quickened sense,  
With the keen vigil of a life intense,  
I watched, an answer from the winds to wring,  
I listened, if perchance the stream might bring  
150 Token from worlds afar: I taught *one* sound  
Unto a thousand echoes—one profound  
Imploring accent to the tomb, the sky—  
One prayer to night—"Awake, appear, reply!"  
Hast thou been told that from the viewless bourne,o  
155 The dark way never hath allowed return?  
That all, which tears can move, with life is fled—  
That earthly love is powerless on the dead?

Believe it not!—there is a large lone star  
Now burning o'er yon western hill afar,  
160 And under its clear light there lies a spot  
Which well might utter forth—Believe it not!  
I sat beneath that planet—I had wept  
My woe to stillness, every night-wind slept;  
A hush was on the hills; the very streams  
165 Went by like clouds, or noiseless founts in dreams,  
And the dark tree o'ershadowing me that hour,  
Stood motionless, even as the gray church-tower  
Whereon I gazed unconsciously:—there came  
A low sound, like the tremor of a flame,  
170 Or like the light quick shiver of a wing,  
Flitting through twilight woods, across the air;  
And I looked up!—Oh! for strong words to bring  
Conviction o'er thy thought!—Before me there,  
He, the departed, stood!—Ay, face to face,  
175 So near, and yet how far!—his form, his mien,  
Gave to remembrance back each burning trace  
Within:—Yet something awfully serene,  
Pure, sculpture-like, on the pale brow, that wore  
Of the once-beating heart no token more;  
180 And stillness on the lip—and o'er the hair  
A gleam, that trembled through the breathless air;  
And an unfathomed calm, that seemed to lie  
In the grave sweetness of the illumined eye;  
Told of the gulfs between our beings set,  
185 And, as that unsheathed spirit-glance I met,  
Made my soul faint:—with *fear*? Oh! *not* with fear!  
With the sick feeling that in *his* far sphere  
My love could be as nothing! But he spoke—  
How shall I tell thee of the startling thrill  
190 In that low voice, whose breezy tones could fill  
My bosom's infinite? O, friend! I woke  
Then first to heavenly life!—Soft, solemn, clear  
Breathed the mysterious accents on mine ear,

195 Yet strangely seemed as if the while they rose  
From depths of distance, o'er the wide repose  
Of slumbering waters wafted, or the dells  
Of mountains, hollow with sweet-echo cells;  
But, as they murmured on, the mortal chill  
200 Passed from me, like a mist before the morn,  
And, to that glorious intercourse upborne  
By slow degrees, a calm, divinely still,  
Possessed my frame: I sought that lighted eye—  
From its intense and searching purity  
I drank in *soul*!—I questioned of the dead—  
205 Of the hushed, starry shores their footsteps tread,  
And I was answered:—if remembrance there,  
With dreamy whispers fill the immortal air;  
If thought, here piled from many a jewel-heap,  
Be treasure in that pensive land to keep;  
210 If love, o'ersweeping change, and blight, and blast  
Find *there* the music of his home at last;  
I asked, and I was answered:—Full and high  
Was that communion with eternity,  
Too rich for aught so fleeting!—Like a knell  
215 Swept o'er my sense its closing words, "Farewell,  
On earth we meet no more!"<sup>3</sup>—and all was gone—  
The pale bright settled brow—the thrilling tone,  
The still and shining eye! and never more  
May twilight gloom or midnight hush restore  
220 That radiant guest! One full-fraught hour of heaven,  
To earthly passion's wild implorings given,  
Was made my own—the ethereal fire hath shivered  
The fragile censer<sup>4</sup> in whose mould it quivered  
Brightly, consumingly! What now is left?  
225 A faded world, of glory's hues bereft—  
A void, a chain!—I dwell 'midst throngs, apart,  
In the cold silence of the stranger's heart;  
A fixed, immortal shadow stands between



230 My spirit and life's fast receding scene;  
A gift hath severed me from human ties,  
A power is gone from all earth's melodies,  
Which never may return: their chords are broken,  
The music of another land hath spoken—  
No after-sound is sweet!—this weary thirst!  
235 And I have heard celestial fountains burst!—  
What *here* shall quench it?

Dost thou not rejoice,  
When the spring sends forth an awakening voice  
Through the young woods?—Thou dost!—And in the  
birth  
Of early leaves, and flowers, and songs of mirth,  
Thousands, like thee, find gladness!—Couldst thou  
know

How every breeze then summons *me* to go!  
How all the light of love and beauty shed  
By those rich hours, but woos me to the dead!  
The *only* beautiful that change no more—  
245 The only loved!—the dwellers on the shore  
Of spring fulfilled!—The dead!—*whom* call we so?  
They that breathe purer air, that feel, that know  
Things wrapt from us!—Away!—within me pent,  
That which is barred from its own element  
250 Still droops or struggles!—But the day *will* come—  
Over the deep the free bird finds its home,  
And the stream lingers 'midst the rocks, yet greets  
The sea at last; and the winged flower-seed meets  
A soil to rest in:—shall not *I*, too, be,  
255 My spirit-love! upborne to dwell with thee?  
Yes! by the power whose conquering anguish stirred  
The tomb, whose cry beyond the stars was heard,  
Whose agony of triumph won thee back  
Through the dim pass no mortal step may track,  
260 Yet shall we meet!—that glimpse of joy divine  
Proved thee for ever and for ever mine!

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A spirit's verdict on Manfred's quest, spoken just after Manfred is convulsed by the disappearance of the Phantom of his beloved Astarte (*Manfred* 2.4.158–59; see p. 679). Hemans's poem can be read as commentary on Byron's play, Percy Shelley's *Alastor*, and Keats's *Endymion* (see the note to lines 216–17), all of which depict a protagonist's problems in communicating with an otherworldly lover.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Suggests an urn in which funerary ashes are kept.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This is the answer to Manfred's question to the Phantom of Astarte (2.4.154): "Say, shall we meet again?" Astarte vanishes, and Nemesis says, "She's gone, and will not be recall'd." Hemans's lines also echo Endymion's renunciation of his dream goddess at a crucial moment in Keats's *Endymion* (4.657–59): "The hour may come / When we shall meet in pure elysium. / On earth I may not love thee."[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Container in which incense is burned.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *invisible*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wind-blown*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *watchfully*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *entreated*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *invisible region*[Return to reference °](#)

# The Romantic Imagination and the “Oriental Nations”

A significant proportion of the poems, novels, and plays written in Britain during the Romantic period are set thousands of miles away from the British Isles, in terrain stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean—contested territory that for much of the nineteenth century would be squabbled over by the British, Russian, and Ottoman Empires. In *Beppo* (1818), Lord Byron’s narrator commented on the public’s fascination with the strangeness of these distant lands and the salability of the English literature repackaging it for domestic consumption: “How quickly would I print (the world delighting) / A Grecian, Syrian, or Assyrian tale; / And sell you, mix’d with western sentimentalism / Some samples of the finest Orientalism.” Byron evidences some bad faith in these flippant lines. In poetry published between 1813 and 1816 he had himself turned regularly to the Islamic world, making locales in the Ottoman Empire the standard backdrop for his stories of glamorous outsiders. Byron’s series of “Turkish tales” joined other bestsellers that traded in like manner on the magnificence, marvel, and horror that the European imagination had come to associate with “Oriental” climes (a nebulous geographical term that concealed, needless to say, the cultural and religious differences that divided the many nations located beyond the eastern margins of Europe). There was, for instance, Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance* (1817), composed of separate long poems that Moore presented as entertainments produced for the court of the seventeenth-century Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. In 1819 and 1824 there were the Crusader novels by Sir Walter Scott, fictions set during the medieval moment when Europeans’ desire to conquer Jerusalem for Christendom first brought them into sustained contact with the civilizations of the Arab-Muslim world. To look eastward for

one's themes became in Romantic-period literature a primary way to examine both cultural identity and difference and the tensions and longings dividing and connecting devotee and infidel, friend and enemy, self and other.

The popularity of these examinations registered geopolitical developments that had begun early in the eighteenth century: first, the chipping away of Mughal dominion over the Indian subcontinent, followed by the slow crumbling of the Ottoman Empire; the territorial gains the British Empire made at both those empires' expense, especially during its wars with Napoleonic France; and most of all, in the words of the critic Nigel Leask, "the transformation of India and parts of the Middle East from sources of tribute and producers of luxury goods to real or potential subject states, sources of raw material and consumer markets for [British] home manufactures." By the 1820s the British East India Company controlled almost the whole of the Indian subcontinent. The end of the Romantic period also saw Britain at last managing to exploit for its own advantage the mighty Chinese Empire, as it had long sought to do; China's autonomy began to be undermined when, to finance its military enterprises, the East India Company took to smuggling opium out of India for export there.

In other respects, though, the decisive event in the history of the Romantic imagination was not the advent of new revenue streams from the empire's Asian colonies or dependencies but the import of new stories. At the start of the eighteenth century, the course of European cultural development had been decisively redirected by the translation, first into French (1704), then English (1706), of the *Alf layla wa layla*, the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*. The tales included in this collection are supposed to have been told over 1,001 nights by the wily heroine, Scheherazade, who uses her narrative skills to awaken her cruel husband's curiosity and so postpone the execution that all the sultan's previous wives have suffered following their wedding nights. Western audiences went wild for this collection of stories from the Arabic heartland of Iraq and Syria. Coleridge reported that when he was a child *The Arabian Nights* made so deep

an impression that he had been “a dreamer” ever since. Cued by the stories of evil magicians, wish-granting genii, and artful storytellers that filled *The Arabian Nights*, as they also filled the faux-Oriental tales that succeeded it in their libraries, English writers increasingly identified the East as the imagination’s own territory. Sometimes it was even heralded as the place where fictionality (make-believe) had begun.

The encounter with the traditions of the East was also valued, to different effect, for how it opened up new vistas for the Western literary imagination—how it offered an escape route from an overfamiliar classical and biblical heritage. The Calcutta-based jurist Sir William Jones was celebrated accordingly for how his imitations of medieval Sanskrit verse (founded, unlike most of the faux-Oriental writing of his compatriots, on deep linguistic knowledge) had expanded English literature’s stock of poetical imagery. “Where can we find so much beauty as in the *Eastern* poems, which turn chiefly upon the loveliest objects in nature?” Jones asked. He conjured for readers back home in damp, smoky England a sunlit Eden, where the breezes carried murmurs of song and the fragrances of spices and flowers.

Jones’s Orient, like that of *The Arabian Nights*, was good to dream with, if in a different way. At the same time, however, Jones was one of the first to insist that the Orient was also good to study. His founding of the Asiatick Society in Calcutta in 1784 heralded a new determination to supplement delicious fantasy with serious linguistic, historical, and scientific research. This scholarship, not incidentally, would also broaden the knowledge base from which colonial administrators might draw.

The representations of the East generated out of this compound of make-believe and empirical, factual study were not easy to resolve into a single picture. (Many Romantic authors seem in fact to have actively cultivated the irresolution. They tended to highlight, rather than play down, the discrepancy in tone between their tales of Eastern wonders and the scholarly notes with which they conventionally surrounded those tales. Absorption in otherness

needed to be countered, it appears, by distance and detachment.) The literary image of the Oriental nations was thus full of contradiction. Idealization often, and increasingly, went hand in hand with vilification. Stories of the harems of the Ottoman Empire and the *zenana* of India, for instance, tended to project, from one moment to the next, both a region of beauty and sensual pleasure and a region defined by a cruel sexual slavery, in which women were denied any measure of autonomy and even denied souls.

English observers who had internalized the French political theorist Montesquieu's account of Asiatic countries as despotism's natural milieu thus counterpointed Jones's pictures of "felix Arabia" (happy Arabia) with stories of the fearfulness and grief that defined life in a region where civil liberty lacked a foothold. The political theorist Judith Shklar explains that, within Montesquieu's discussion of despotism in *The Spirit of the Laws*, "the East is not so much a geographic area as a nightmare territory of the mind in which all the worst human impulses govern." Nonetheless, Montesquieu's tendency to look eastward for his examples of unchecked, arbitrary, self-indulging tyrants had real historical effects. He and European commentators writing in his wake made it appear that there was something inherently "Asiatic" about tyranny. Such representations could be used to alibi the increasing interventionism of the imperial powers. They helped repackage economic and political domination as civilizational uplift—as a rescue of populations who needed to be saved from their own slavish propensities.

Several visions of the Oriental nations contended in the public sphere, in other words, and underwrote diverging accounts of what Englishmen and women themselves might be in relationship to these cultural others. Arrayed chronologically, the writings excerpted in this section do suggest that the farther one progresses into the nineteenth century, the less likely one is to encounter the belief, held by William Jones, that Britain could learn from Hindu and Islamic cultures. Fewer writers gave voice to the feeling that the English heroine of Phebe Gibbes's *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789) celebrates when dazzled by her first view of Indian splendor: "the European

world faded before my eyes, and I became *orientalised* at all points." Plots driven by cross-cultural identification and sympathy (Gibbes's, Sydney Owenson's in *The Missionary*) gave way over time to plots driven by antipathy, resentment, and fear.

As twenty-first-century postcolonial critics have observed, the often degrading images of the Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures manufactured in the Romantic period bolstered the English sense of moral superiority. They helped naturalize Western rule over these regions. But just as the *Arabian Nights'* Scheherazade might have foreseen, the European appetite for stories of the marvelous East remained insatiable all the same.

## **BARON DE MONTESQUIEU (CHARLES-LOUIS DE SECONDAT)**

The French aristocrat the Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) is famous for his influence on the American constitution, whose architects derived the principle of checks and balances from the political philosopher's survey of "the laws, the various customs, and manners, of all the nations of the earth." *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) also shaped Anglo-American understandings of Asia. According to its deterministic account (founded in part on reports by European travelers), the peoples of Asia were condemned both by the sultry climate and by their nature to suffer under the yoke of despotic government: "Here they have no limitations or restrictions . . . [and] man is a creature that blindly submits to the absolute will of the sovereign." The excerpts below are taken from the 1777 English translation of the text in *The Complete Works of Montesquieu*.



# ***From The Spirit of the Laws***

### ***Book V, Chapter 13: An Idea of Despotic Power***

When the savages of Louisiana are desirous of fruit, they cut the tree to the root, and gather the fruit. This is an emblem of despotic government.

### ***From Book V, Chapter 14: In What Manner the Laws Are Relative to the Principles of Despotic Government***

The principle of despotic government is fear: but a timid, ignorant, and faint-spirited people have no occasion for a great number of laws.

Every thing ought to depend here on two or three ideas: hence there is no necessity that any new notions should be added. When we want to break a horse, we take care not to let him change his master, his lesson, or his pace. Thus an impression is made on his brain by two or three motions, and no more.

If a prince is shut up in a seraglio,<sup>1</sup> he cannot leave his voluptuous abode without alarming those who keep him confined. They will not bear that his person and power should pass into other hands. He seldom, therefore, wages war in person, and hardly ventures to intrust the command to his generals.

A prince of this stamp, unaccustomed to resistance in his palace, is enraged to see his will opposed by armed force: hence he is generally governed by wrath or vengeance. Besides, he can have no notion of true glory. War, therefore, is carried on, under such a government, in its full natural fury, and less extent is given to the law of nations than in other states.

Such a prince has so many imperfections, that they are afraid to expose his natural stupidity to public view. He is concealed in his palace, and the people are ignorant of his situation. It is lucky for him that the inhabitants of those countries need only the name of a prince to govern them.

When Charles XII was at Bender, he met with some opposition from the senate of Sweden:<sup>2</sup> upon which he wrote word home that he would send one of his boots to command them. This boot would have governed like a despotic prince.

If the prince is a prisoner, he is supposed to be dead, and another mounts the throne. The treaties made by the prisoner are void; his successor will not ratify them. And, indeed (as he is the law, the state, and the prince), when he is no longer a prince, he is

nothing: were he not, therefore, deemed to be deceased, the state would be subverted.

One thing which chiefly determined the Turks to conclude a separate peace with Peter I was the Muscovites telling the vizir,<sup>3</sup> that, in Sweden, another prince had been set upon the throne.

The preservation of the state is only the preservation of the prince, or rather of the palace where he is confined. Whatever does not directly menace this palace, or the capital, makes no impression on ignorant, proud, and prejudiced minds; and, as for the concatenation of events, they are unable to trace, to foresee, or even to conceive it. Politics, with its several springs and laws, must here be very much limited; the political government is as simple as the civil.

The whole is reduced to reconciling the political and civil administration to the domestic government, the officers of state to those of the seraglio.

Such a state is happiest when it can look upon itself as the only one in the world, when it is environed with deserts, and separated from those people whom they call barbarians. Since it cannot depend on the militia, it is proper it should destroy a part of itself.

As fear is the principle of despotic government, its end is tranquillity: but this tranquillity cannot be called a peace; no, it is only the silence of those towns which the enemy is ready to invade.

\* \* \*

1748

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Harem; the apartments in the sovereign's palace in which his wives and concubines were secluded.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: After Swedish forces were routed by the army of the Russian czar in 1709 (in the battle that kicks off Byron's 1819

poem *Mazeppa*), the Swedish king Charles XII began a five-year exile in Bender, then a town in the Ottoman Empire.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: The Ottoman sultan's chief minister.[Return to reference 3](#)

## SIR WILLIAM JONES

A formidably talented linguist and legal scholar, Sir William Jones (1746–1794) spearheaded the Oriental Renaissance of the late eighteenth century. His translations of Arabic, Farsi, and Sanskrit poetry, some of which he began while an undergraduate at Oxford, had a tremendous impact on European literature. The excitement his writing generated was not so different from that greeting the humanists of fifteenth-century Italy when they rediscovered long-forgotten texts from classical antiquity. Jones's identification of the affinity between Sanskrit and classical Greek and Latin laid the foundation for historical linguistics: the idea of an Indo-European common grammar originates with an address he gave to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta in 1784. While serving as high court judge in Bengal from 1783 until his death, Jones cooperated with a group of Brahmin scholars on a massive digest of Hindu law that became the basis for courtroom practice throughout British India.

The essay excerpted here—a celebration of the fertility of the “Eastern” imagination that proceeds through a survey of Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Mughal poetry—appeared in Jones's *Poems Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages*. In linking the reinvigoration of modern Western poetry to a rejection of familiar neoclassical examples, it is sometimes seen as prophesying Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. We reprint its final paragraph.

## ***From On the Poetry of the Eastern Nations***

\* \* \*

I must once more request, that in bestowing these praises on the writings of Asia, I may not be thought to derogate from the merit of the Greek and Latin poems, which have justly been admired in every age: yet I cannot but think that our European poetry has subsisted too long on the perpetual repetition of the same images, and incessant allusions to the same fables: and it has been my endeavour for several years to inculcate this truth, 'That, if the principal writings of the Asiatics, which are repositied in our public libraries, were printed with the usual advantage of notes and illustrations; and if the languages of the Eastern nations were studied in our places of education, where every other branch of useful knowledge is taught to perfection; a new and ample field would be open for speculation; we should have a more extensive insight into the history of the human mind, we should be furnished with a new set of images and similitudes, and a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light, which future scholars might explain, and future poets might imitate.'

1772

## JAMES BEATTIE

"On Fable and Romance," a 1783 essay by an influential Scottish poet and philosopher, represents an early attempt to assess and contextualize the rapid expansion of novel writing and novel reading in eighteenth-century Britain. Also a reluctant attempt, inasmuch as James Beattie (1735–1803) ends his investigation of "modern romances," as he calls the new genre, by repudiating his topic: "Let not the usefulness of romance be estimated by the length of my discourse upon it," he writes. "Romances are a dangerous recreation." Some hint of that anxiety about fiction's allure is audible even in this early passage in the essay, where Beattie turns to "the Oriental nations" to trace the origins of the romance and, in doing so, registers the high profile that *The Arabian Nights* and the many English-language books that imitated its tales of marvels and magic enjoyed in his moment. Here Beattie insinuates that there is something Eastern—exotic, un-British—about the appetite for fantastic stories; he seems to associate the very concept of fictionality or make-believe ("fable") with the hedonistic landscape of Oriental despotism.



## ***From On Fable and Romance***

\* \* \*

[T]he Oriental nations have long been famous for fabulous narrative. The indolence peculiar to the genial climates of Asia, and the luxurious life which the kings and other great men, of those countries, lead in their seraglios, have made them seek for this sort of amusement, and set a high value upon it. When an Eastern prince happens to be idle, as he commonly is, and at a loss for expedients to kill the time, he commands his Grand Visir, or his favourite, to tell him stories. Being ignorant, and consequently credulous; having no passion for moral improvement, and little knowledge of nature; he does not desire, that they should be probable, or of an instructive tendency: it is enough if they be astonishing. And hence it is, no doubt, that those oriental tales are so extravagant. Every thing is carried on by enchantment and prodigy; by fairies, genii, and demons, and wooden horses, which, on turning a peg, fly through the air with inconceivable swiftness.

Another thing remarkable in these eastern tales, is, that their authors expatiate, with peculiar delight, in the description of magnificence; rich robes, gaudy furniture, sumptuous entertainments, and palaces shining in gold, or sparkling with diamonds. This too is conformable to the character and circumstances of the people. Their great men, whose taste has never been improved by studying the *simplicity* of nature and art, pique themselves chiefly on the *splendour* of their equipage, and the vast quantities of gold, jewels, and curious things, which they can heap together in their repositories.

\* \* \*

## SIR WILLIAM JONES

William Jones's "Hymn to Camdeo," the first of nine "hymns" he wrote for the deities of the Hindu pantheon, amalgamates exotic content with the familiar classical form of the Pindaric ode. Even so, the "Hymn" was for a few decades understood to be Jones's translation rather than his original composition. Camdeo, Jones explains in a preface, is the same as the Romans' Cupid, a god of love; but, he continues, "the *Indian* description of his person and arms, his family, attendants, and attributes has new and peculiar beauties."

# Hymn to Camdeo

What potent God from Agra's<sup>1</sup> orient bow'rs  
Floats through the lucid air, whilst living flow'rs  
With sunny twine the vocal arbours wreathe,  
And gales enamour'd heavenly fragrance breathe?  
5     Hail, power unknown! for at thy beck  
      Vales and groves their bosoms deck,  
      And every laughing blossom dresses  
      With gems of dew his musky tresses.  
I feel, I feel thy genial flame divine,  
And hallow thee, and kiss thy shrine.  
10

'Know'st thou not me?' Celestial sounds I hear!  
'Know'st thou not me?' Ah, spare a mortal ear!  
'Behold'—My swimming eyes entranc'd I raise,  
But oh! they sink before the' excessive blaze.  
15     Yes, son of Maya,<sup>2</sup> yes, I know  
      Thy bloomy shafts and cany<sup>3</sup> bow,  
      Cheeks with youthful glory beaming,  
      Locks in braids ethereal streaming,  
Thy scaly standard,<sup>4</sup> thy mysterious arms,  
And all thy pains and all thy charms.  
20

God of each lovely sight, each lovely sound,  
Soul-kindling, world-inflaming, star-ycrown'd,  
Eternal Cama! Or doth Smara bright,  
Or proud Ananga<sup>5</sup> give thee more delight?  
25     Whate'er thy seat, whate'er thy name,  
      Seas, Earth, and Air, thy reign proclaim:  
      Wreathy smiles and roseate pleasures  
      Are thy richest, sweetest treasures.  
All animals to thee their tribute bring,

30 And hail thee universal king.

Thy consort mild, Affection ever true,<sup>6</sup>  
Graces thy side, her vest of glowing hue,  
And in her train twelve blooming girls advance,  
Touch golden strings and knit the mirthful dance.

35 Thy dreaded implements they bear,  
And wave them in the scented air,  
Each with pearls her neck adorning,  
Brighter than the tears of morning.

Thy crimson ensign, which before them flies,  
40 Decks with new stars the sapphire skies.

God of the flowery shafts and flowery bow,  
Delight of all above and all below!  
Thy lov'd companion, constant from his birth,  
In heaven clep'd<sup>o</sup> Bessent, and gay Spring on earth,

45 Weaves thy green robe and flaunting bow'rs,  
And from thy clouds draws balmy show'rs,  
He with fresh arrows fills thy quiver,  
(Sweet the gift, and sweet the giver!)

And bids the many-plumed warbling throng  
50 Burst the pent blossoms with their song.

He bends the luscious cane, and twists the string  
With bees, how sweet! but ah, how keen their sting!  
He with five flowerets tips thy ruthless darts,  
Which through five senses pierce enraptur'd hearts:

55 Strong Chumpā, rich in odorous gold,  
Warm Amer, nurs'd in heavenly mould,  
Dry Nagkeser in silver smiling,  
Hot Kiticum our sense beguiling,

And last, to kindle fierce the scorching flame,  
60 Loveshaft, which gods bright Bela name.<sup>7</sup>

Can men resist thy power, when Krishen yields,

Krishen, who still in Matra's holy fields  
 Tunes harps immortal, and to strains divine  
 Dances by moonlight with the Gopia nine?<sup>8</sup>  
 But, when thy daring arm untam'd  
 65 At Mahadeo a loveshaft aim'd,  
 Heaven shook, and, smit with stony wonder,  
 Told his deep dread in bursts of thunder,  
 Whilst on thy beauteous limbs an azure fire  
 70 Blaz'd forth, which never must expire.<sup>9</sup>  
  
 O thou for ages born, yet ever young,  
 For ages may thy Bramin's lay be sung!  
 And, when thy lory<sup>o</sup> spreads his emerald wings  
 To waft thee high above the towers of Kings,  
 Whilst o'er thy throne the moon's pale light  
 75 Pours her soft radiance through the night,  
 And to each floating cloud discovers  
 The haunts of bless'd or joyless lovers,  
 Thy mildest influence to thy bard impart,  
 80 To warm, but not consume his heart.

1784

## Endnotes

- Note 1: City in northern India and location of the Taj Mahal.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In the Vedic tradition that feeds into modern Hinduism, Maya names the power of illusion, the appearances concealing reality.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, made from sugarcane.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In his prefatory remarks, Jones mentions that Camdeo's attendants carry his flag, which shows "a fish on a red ground."[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: "Cáma" (love), "Smara" (remembrance), and "Ananga" (bodiless one) are alternative names for this deity.[Return to](#)

### [reference 5](#)

- Note 6: Jones's modern editor, Michael Franklin, remarks on how with this line's reference to the god's "consort," Jones manages to "convey a type of marital fidelity" that is ill suited to both Western and Eastern notions of Eros.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Lines 55–60 identify the various species of Indian flowers that form part of the love god's weaponry. Banks was a keen botanist, sending seeds and roots of India's native plants back to the Royal Society in England.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Jones refers to the story, told in the poet Jayadeva's *The Song of Góvinda*, of the god Krishna's love for Rhapa, one of the nine gopi (milkmaids) with whom the deity liked to play. Jones's 1792 translation of this 12th-century Sanskrit epic, whose manuscript he rediscovered with the help of a Brahmin friend, was acclaimed throughout western Europe.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: "The seventh stanza," Jones states in his preface, "alludes to the bold attempt" Camdeo made "to wound the great god *Mahadeo* [also known as *Siva*], for which he was punished by a flame consuming his corporeal nature and reducing him to a mental essence; and hence his chief dominion is over the *minds* of mortals."[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *called*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *parrot*[Return to reference °](#)

## WILLIAM BECKFORD

Thanks to his inherited fortune, founded on his family's Jamaican estates, William Beckford (1760–1844) was for a time famous mainly as "England's wealthiest son." But in the wake of the public scandal sparked by his love affairs with, simultaneously, his cousin's wife and William Courtenay, the sixteen-year-old in line to be the next Earl of Devon, Beckford was also a social outcast. *Vathek* was completed not long after Beckford fled disgrace in England to begin an exile of eleven years on the European continent. He originally composed the book in French, during a "single sitting," his biographer reports, "of three days and two nights." This account suggests something of the intensity of Beckford's relation to the dark and glamorous fantasy world that his book assembles out of materials found in texts like *The Arabian Nights*—and the urgency of the escape from Englishness and English norms that the book's composition facilitated. In some measure, the story of the caliph Vathek's lust for power and this sensual tyrant's fatal deception at the hands of an even greater villain, a mysterious Indian magician known as the Giaour, was an intensely personal document: Beckford all but invited his readers to regard this Oriental despot's story as authorial autobiography.

However, on *Vathek's* debut in English in 1786 some readers lit on alternative ways to understand the book, prompted by the 122 pages of scholarly notes on the customs of the Islamic world that Beckford's English translator, Samuel Henley, thought the story required. Henley's annotations to a book that was then known under the title *An Arabian Tale from an Unpublished Manuscript* were praised with enthusiasm for their accuracy, despite the evidence that many had been cribbed from a seventeenth-century French encyclopedia.

The clash between those two ways of reading and valuing *Vathek* suggests the duality in late eighteenth-century accounts of the

Middle East. It suggests how the Arabia of Beckford's tale could represent at once an object of ethnographic investigation—an investigation that could be made to serve the English nation's geopolitical interests—and a site of fantasy and refuge from workaday English reality.



## ***From The History of the Caliph Vathek***

Vathek, ninth *caliph* of the race of the Abassides, was the son of Motassem, and the grandson of Haroun Al Raschid.<sup>1</sup> From an early accession to the throne, and the talents he possessed to adorn it; his subjects were induced to expect that his reign would be long, and happy. His figure was pleasing, and majestick; but when he was angry, one of his eyes became so terrible, that no person could bear to behold it; and the wretch upon whom it was fixed, instantly fell backward and, sometimes, expired. For fear, however, of depopulating his dominions, and making his palace desolate, he but rarely gave way to his anger.

Being much addicted to women, and the pleasures of the table, he sought, by his affability, to procure agreeable companions; and he succeeded the better, as his generosity was unbounded; and his indulgences unrestrained: for he was by no means scrupulous: nor did he think, with the Caliph, Omar Ben Abdalaziz, that it was necessary to make a hell of this world, to enjoy Paradise in the next.

He surpassed in magnificence all his predecessors. The palace of Alkoremme, which his father Motassem had erected, on the hill of Pied Horses and which commanded the whole city of Samarah,<sup>2</sup> was, in his idea, far too scanty: he added, therefore, five wings, or rather, other palaces, which he destined for the particular gratification of each of his senses.

In the first of these were tables continually covered, with the most exquisite dainties, which were supplied, both by night and by day, according to their constant consumption, whilst the most delicious wines, and the choicest cordials, flowed forth from a hundred fountains that were never exhausted. This Palace was called THE ETERNAL or UNSATIATING BANQUET.

The second was styled THE TEMPLE OF MELODY, or THE NECTAR OF THE SOUL. It was inhabited by the most skilful musicians and admired

poets of the time, who not only displayed their talents within, but, dispersing in bands without, caused every surrounding scene to reverberate their songs, which were continually varied in the most delightful succession.

The palace named THE DELIGHT OF THE EYES, or THE SUPPORT OF MEMORY was one entire enchantment. Rarities collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such profusion, as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were arranged. One gallery exhibited the pictures of the celebrated Mani:<sup>3</sup> and statues that seemed to be alive. Here, a well-managed perspective attracted the sight; there, the magick of opticks agreeably deceived it: whilst the Naturalist, on his part, exhibited, in their several classes, the various gifts that Heaven had bestowed on our globe. In a word, Vathek omitted nothing in this palace that might gratify the curiosity of those who resorted to it; although he was not able to satisfy his own, for, he was, of all men, the most curious.

THE PALACE OF PERFUMES, which was termed likewise, THE INCENTIVE TO PLEASURE, consisted of various halls where the different perfumes which the earth produces, were kept perpetually burning in censers of gold. Flambeaus<sup>4</sup> and aromattick lamps were here lighted in open day. But the too powerful effects of this agreeable delirium might be avoided, by descending into an immense garden, where an assemblage of every fragrant flower diffused through the air the purest odours.

The fifth palace, denominated THE RETREAT OF JOY, or THE DANGEROUS, was frequented by troops of young females, beautiful as the Houris, and not less seducing, who never failed to receive, with caresses, all whom the Caliph allowed to approach them: for, he was by no means disposed to be jealous, as his own women were secluded within the palace he inhabited himself.

Notwithstanding the sensuality in which Vathek indulged, he experienced no abatement in the love of his people, who thought, that a sovereign immersed in pleasure was not less tolerable to his subjects, than one that employed himself in creating them foes. But the unquiet and impetuous disposition of the Caliph, would not allow

him to rest there. He had studied so much for his amusement in the life-time of his father as to acquire a great deal of knowledge; though not a sufficiency to satisfy himself, for, he wished to know everything, even sciences that did not exist. He was fond of engaging in disputes with the learned, but liked them not to push their opposition with warmth. He stopped the mouths of those, with presents, whose mouths could be stopped, whilst others, whom his liberality was unable to subdue, he sent to prison to cool their blood, a remedy that often succeeded.

Vathek discovered also a predilection for theological controversy; but it was not with the orthodox that he usually held. By this means he induced the zealots to oppose him, and then persecuted them in return; for, he resolved, at any rate, to have reason on his side.

The great prophet Mahomet, whose Vicars the Caliphs are, beheld with indignation from his abode in the seventh heaven, the irreligious conduct of such a viceregent. "Let us leave him to himself," said he to the Genii, who are always ready to receive his commands: "let us see to what lengths his folly and impiety will carry him: if he run into excess, we shall know how to chastise him. Assist him, therefore, to complete the tower which, in imitation of Nimrod,<sup>5</sup> he hath begun; not, like that great warrior, to escape being drowned, but from the insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of Heaven:—he will not divine the fate that awaits him."

The Genii obeyed; and when the workmen had raised their structure a cubit, in the day-time, two cubit more were added in the night. The expedition with which the fabrick arose was not a little flattering to the vanity of Vathek. He fancied that even insensible matter shewed a forwardness to subserve his designs; not considering that the successes of the foolish and wicked form the first rod of their chastisement.

His pride arrived at its height, when having ascended, for the first time, the eleven thousand stairs of his tower, he cast his eyes below, and beheld men not larger than pismires;<sup>6</sup> mountains, than shells; and cities, than bee-hives. The idea which such an elevation inspired of his own grandeur completely bewildered him; he was

almost ready to adore himself; till, lifting his eyes upward, he saw the stars, as high above him, as they appeared, when he stood on the surface of the earth. He consoled himself, however, for this transient perception of his littleness, with the thought of being great in the eyes of others; and flattered himself, that the light of his mind would extend beyond the reach of his sight, and transfer to the stars the decrees of his destiny.

\* \* \*

## 1782–85 **Endnotes**

1786

- Note 1: The names ground Beckford's tale in the history of Islamic civilization. In the 8th century, Haroun Al Raschid ruled a territory extending from northern Africa, through Iraq and Iran, all the way to modern Pakistan. "Caliph": from the Arabic *khalifa*, designating God's deputy on earth. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A real city, located in modern-day Jordan. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Iranian founder of the sect of Manicheans. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Torches. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: He figures in the Book of Genesis and the Chronicles. Biblical commentaries often identified him with the building of the Tower of Babel. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Ants. [Return to reference 6](#)

## ROBERT SOUTHEY

Inspired by a formative childhood encounter with Bernard Picart and Jean Frédéric Bernard's monumental survey *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the World* (1723), Robert Southey (1774–1843) as a young man intended to write a series of epics that would one after another, on an annual basis, engage all the belief systems of the globe—"the Persian, the Runic, the Keltic, the Greek, the Jewish, the Roman Catholick, and the Japanese," as he outlined in 1808. The grandiose scheme was not realized, but in 1801 Southey did publish *Thalaba the Destroyer*, set in Islamic Arabia, and then the following year set to transposing his Arabian epic's tale of sorcery and revenge into a new setting, that of Hindu India. *The Curse of Kehama*, a poem of twenty-four books and more than a hundred pages of notes, was eventually published in 1810 (so many books, one guesses, because Southey was emulating Homer, and so many notes, because he was emulating Beckford and Henley).

The poem begins with the curse that the cruel Brahmin priest Kehama pronounces on Ladurlad, the peasant who has killed Kehama's heir in the effort to save Kailyal, a fellow peasant, from rape at his hands. Much of the narrative of *The Curse of Kehama* tracks Kehama's vengeful pursuit of Ladurlad and Kailyal, until, in a last-minute reversal of fortunes, his curse redounds on the tyrant's own head, and he is doomed to eternal suffering in hell. Here we pick up the story at an earlier moment, in Book 14, when the virtuous maiden Kailyal is on the verge of being forced into a ritual marriage of death with the god of the Juggernaut, an avatar of Krishna and the seven-headed god referred to in the following lines. Though the episode, titled "Jaga-Naut," has some of the flavor of the Gothic novels of Southey's day (and would be replayed in an even more lurid idiom in Charles Maturin's 1824 novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*), Southey's notes refer the reader to several factual sources.

## ***From Jaga-Naut***

Joy in the City of great Jaga-Naut!  
Joy in the seven-headed Idol's shrine!  
A virgin-bride his ministers have brought,  
A mortal maid, in form and face divine,  
Peerless among all daughters of mankind;  
5 Search'd they the world again from East to West,  
In endless quest,  
Seeking the fairest and the best,  
No maid so lovely might they hope to find; . .  
For she hath breath'd celestial air,  
10 And heavenly food hath been her fare,  
And heavenly thoughts and feelings give her face  
That heavenly grace.  
Joy in the City of great Jaga-Naut,  
Joy in the seven-headed Idol's shrine!  
15 The fairest Maid his Yoguees<sup>1</sup> sought,  
A fairer than the fairest have they brought,  
A maid of charms surpassing human thought,  
A maid divine.

Now bring ye forth the Chariot of the God!  
20 Bring him abroad,  
That through the swarming City he may ride;  
And by his side  
Place ye the Maid of more than mortal grace,  
The Maid of perfect form and heavenly face!  
25 Set her aloft in triumph, like a bride  
Upon the bridal car,<sup>o</sup>  
And spread the joyful tidings wide and far, . .  
Spread it with trump and voice  
That all may hear, and all who hear rejoice, . .

30 The Mighty One hath found his mate! the God  
Will ride abroad!  
To-night will he go forth from his abode!  
Ye myriads who adore him,  
35 Prepare the way before him!

Uprear'd on twenty wheels elate,  
Huge as a Ship, the bridal car appear'd;  
Loud creak its ponderous wheels, as through the  
gate  
A thousand Bramins<sup>o</sup> drag the enormous load.  
There, thron'd aloft in state,  
40 The Image of the seven-headed God  
Came forth from his abode; and at his side  
Sate Kailyal like a bride;  
A bridal statue rather might she seem,  
For she regarded all things like a dream,  
45 Having no thought, nor fear, nor will, nor aught  
Save hope and faith, that liv'd within her still.

O silent Night, how have they startled thee  
With the brazen trumpet's blare!  
And thou, O Moon! whose quiet light serene  
50 Filleth wide heaven, and bathing hill and wood,  
Spreads o'er the peaceful valley like a flood,  
How have they dimm'd thee with the torches glare,  
Which round yon moving pageant flame and flare,  
As the wild rout, with deafening song and shout,  
55 Fling their long flashes out,  
That, like infernal lightnings, fire the air.

A thousand pilgrims strain  
Arm, shoulder, breast and thigh, with might and  
main,  
To drag that sacred wain,<sup>o</sup>  
60 And scarce can draw along the enormous load.

Prone fall the frantic votaries<sup>o</sup> in its road,  
And, calling on the God,  
Their self-devoted bodies there they lay  
To pave his chariot-way.  
65 On Jaga-Naut they call,  
The ponderous Car rolls on, and crushes all.  
Through blood and bones it ploughs its dreadful  
path.  
Groans rise unheard; the dying cry,  
And death and agony  
70 Are trodden under foot by yon mad throng,  
Who follow close, and thrust the deadly wheels  
along.

Pale grows the Maid at this accursed sight;  
The yells which round her rise  
Have rous'd her with affright,  
75 And fear hath given to her dilated eyes  
A wilder light.  
Where shall those eyes be turn'd? she knows not  
where!  
Downward they dare not look, for there  
Is death, and horror, and despair;  
80 Nor can her patient looks to Heaven repair,  
For the huge Idol over her, in air,  
Spreads his seven hideous heads, and wide  
Extends their snaky necks on every side;  
And all around, behind, before,  
85 The bridal Car, is the raging rout,  
With frantic shout, and deafening roar,  
Tossing the torches' flames about.  
And the double double peals of the drum are there,  
And the startling burst of the trumpet's blare;  
90 And the gong, that seems, with its thunders dread,  
To stun the living, and waken the dead.  
The ear-strings throb as if they were broke,



95                      And the eye-lids drop at the weight of its stroke.  
                         Fain would the Maid have kept them fast,  
                         But open they start at the crack of the blast.

\* \* \*

1801–10

1810

## Endnotes

- Note 1: That is, yogis. In an 1811 letter to the publisher John Murray, Southey offered a definition of *yoguee*: "Hindoo Devotee."[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *chariot*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *Hindu priests*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wagon*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *worshipers*[Return to reference °](#)

## SYDNEY OWENSON

Set in seventeenth-century India, and using that setting to comment on what colonialism would become two centuries later, *The Missionary* narrates the doomed love between Hilarion, a Portuguese Franciscan monk, and Luxima, the Hindu priestess whose conversion he had aimed to secure. Throughout her career, the Anglo-Irish Sydney Owenson (1778?–1859) used her trademark blend of sentimental fiction and travel narrative to probe the relations between colonized and colonizer and query the possibility of cross-cultural understanding. *The Missionary* continues an investigation begun in Owenson's runaway success, *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806)—in part about Irish resistance to English rule—and continued in her *Ida of Athens* (1809)—in part about Greece's rebellion against the Ottoman Empire.

In 1810 Southey had used the *The Curse of Kehama*—partially intended as his demonstration that, as he put it, Hinduism was “of all false religions . . . the most monstrous in its fables, and the most fatal in its effects”—to endorse the interventionism and proselytizing that were in this moment becoming key elements of British imperial policy. Owenson by contrast tells a story in which tragedy arises from religious dogmatism. As in the passages reprinted here, which record Hilarion's first encounter with Luxima, Owenson's protagonists suffer because they and their communities, Brahmin and Catholic, have internalized the prejudices making it impossible for them to love. Percy Shelley pressed *The Missionary* on friends after reading it in 1812 and wrote, “Since I have read it I have read no other—but I have thought strangely.” In 1816 he turned that mental dislocation to account in *Alastor*, whose veiled maiden is a new version of Luxima.

## ***From The Missionary: An Indian Tale***<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

The religious attendants of the Guru, mounted on Arabian horses, led the van;<sup>2</sup> followed by the Ramganny, or dancing priestesses of the temple, who sung, as they proceeded, the histories of their gods, while incarnate upon earth. Their movements were slow, languid, and graceful; and their hymns, accompanied by the tamboora, the seringa, and other instruments, whose deep, soft, and solemn tones, seem consecrated to the purposes of a tender and fanciful religion, excited in the soul of their auditors, emotions which belonged not all to Heaven.

This group, which resembled, in form and movement, the personification of the first hours of Love and Youth, was succeeded by the Guru, mounted on an elephant, which moved with a majestic pace; his howdah,<sup>3</sup> of pure gold, sparkling to the radiance of the rising day. Disciples of the Brahman surrounded his elephant, and were immediately followed by a palanquin, which from its simplicity formed a striking contrast to the splendid objects that had preceded it. Its drapery, composed of the snowy muslin of the country, shone like the fleecy vapour on which the sun's first light reposes: its delicate shafts were entwined with the caressing fibres of the camalata, the flower of the Indian heaven, dedicated to Camdeo, the god of 'mystic love,' whose crimson blossoms breathed of odours which soothed, rather than intoxicated the senses.

The acclamations which had rent the air on the appearance of the Guru, died softly away as the palanquin approached. An awe more profound, a feeling more pure, more sublimated, seemed to take possession of the multitude; for, indistinctly seen through the transparent veil of the palanquin, appeared the most sacred of vestals, the Prophetess and Brachmachira of Cashmire. Her perfect

form, thus shrouded, caught, from the circumstance, a mysterious charm, and seemed like one of the splendid illusions, with which the enthusiasm of religion brightens the holy dream of its votarist, like the spirit which descends amidst the shadows of night upon the slumbers of the blessed. Considered as the offspring of Brahma, as a ray of the divine excellence, the Indians of the most distinguished rank drew back as she approached, lest their very breath should pollute that region of purity her respiration consecrated; and the odour of the sacred flowers, by which she was adorned, was inhaled with an eager devotion, as if it purified the soul it almost seemed to penetrate. The venerated palanquin was guarded by a number of pilgrim women, and the chief casts of the inhabitants of Lahore; while a band of the native troops closed the procession, which proceeded to the Pagoda of Crishna.

From the contemplation of a spectacle so new, so unexpected, the Missionary retired within his solitary tent, with that feeling of horror and disgust, which a profanation of the sentiment and purposes of religion might be supposed to excite, in a mind so pure, so zealous, so far above all the pomp and passions of life, and hitherto so ignorant of all the images connected with their representation. The music, the perfumes, the women, the luxury, and the splendour of the extraordinary procession, offended his piety, and almost disordered his imagination. He thought, for a moment, of the perils of an enterprise, undertaken in a country where the very air was unfavourable to virtue, and where all breathed a character of enjoyment, even over the awful<sup>4</sup> sanctity of religion; a species of enjoyment, to whose very existence he had been, hitherto, almost a stranger; but the genius of his zeal warmed in proportion to the obstacles he found he had to encounter.

\* \* \*

The sibyl Priestess stood at the foot of the shrine of her tutelar deity, and the superstitious multitude fell prostrate at the feet of the Prophetess. They invoked her intercession with the god she served:

mothers held up their infants to her view; fathers inquired from her the fate of their absent sons; and many addressed her on the future events of their lives; while she, not more deceiving than deceived, became the victim of her own imposition, and stood in the midst of her votarists, in all the imposing charm of holy illusion. Her enthusiasm once kindled, her imagination became disordered: believing herself inspired, she looked the immortality she fancied, and uttered rhapsodies in accents so impressive and so tender, and with emotions so wild, and yet so touching, that the mind no longer struggled against the imposition of the senses, and the spirit of fanatical zeal confirmed the influence of human loveliness.

Hitherto, curiosity had induced the Missionary to follow the procession; but he now turned back, horror-struck. Too long had the apostle of Christianity been the witness of those impious rites, offered by the idolaters to the idolatress; and the indignation he felt at all he had seen, at all he had heard, produced an irritability of feeling, new to a mind so tranquil, and but little consonant to a character so regulated, so subdued, so far above even the laudable weakness of human nature. He considered the false Prophetess as the most fatal opponent to his intentions, and he looked to her conversion as the most effectual means to accomplish the success of his enterprise. He shuddered to reflect on the weakness and frailty of man, who is so often led to truth by the allurements which belong to error; and he devoted the remainder of the day to the consideration of those pious plans, by which he hoped, one day, to shade the brow of the Heathen Priestess with the sacred veil of the Christian Nun.

\* \* \*

1811

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

Hilarion has decided, counseled by the Brahmin philosopher who tutors him in the native languages, to launch his evangelizing by participating in the theological debates held to mark the arrival in the city of Lahore of the guru of Cashmire. The first of the excerpts here describes the guru's entrance into the city, along with his granddaughter Luxima. A "brachmachira," or nun, she is devoted, like her grandfather, to the Vedanti sect, which Hilarion's adviser describes as a faith centered on the notion that "a passionate and exclusive love of Heaven is that feeling only, which offers no illusion to the soul, and secures its eternal felicity." This description

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Procession. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Canopied seat used for riding on an elephant's back. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Awe-inspiring. [Return to reference 4](#)

## GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON

"The public are orientalizing," Byron wrote to Thomas Moore in August 1813, counseling his brother poet to engage with the East, that most salable of literary themes. Byron assiduously followed his own advice. He had already launched his line of "Turkish tales" with *The Giaour*, first published in June 1813 and then in longer and longer versions, over the next two years. Between 1813 and 1816, he followed up this narrative poem with similar, and similarly bestselling, tales: *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, and *The Siege of Corinth*.

*The Giaour* originated, Byron said, in a story he had heard sung in a Levantine coffeehouse he had visited by chance during his travels of 1809–10. It is a purposefully fragmentary narrative, divided between multiple narrators and vantage points on the action, and supplemented, in the manner of earlier literary reports from the eastern edge of Christian Europe, with notes about this foreign land's customs and topography, notes mainly omitted from the excerpt reprinted here. In prefatory remarks affixed to one edition, Byron gave the general outline of what his story would have been "when entire": it "*contained the adventures of a female slave, who was thrown, in the Mussulman [Mohammedan] manner, into the sea for infidelity, and avenged by a young Venetian.*" That slave is Leila, the favorite among the concubines whom the Turkish lord Hassan keeps in his harem. Her lover, the Venetian, is the poem's "Giaour." (Byron possibly encountered in Beckford's *Vathek* this exotic word for "foreigner" or "infidel"—pronounced, we think, so as to rhyme with "power.") The poem concludes with the narrative of the Christian friar who listens to the Giaour's confession in the monastery to which he has retreated to repent his sins. In the section presented here, the primary voice is also that of a bystander to the action, here a Turkish fisherman, who reports the "strange rumours" circulating in his city



following Leila's disappearance. This excerpt is from *The Giaour's* fifth edition.



**The Giaour.** The translations of Byron's Turkish tales fired the imaginations of many visual artists in France, including Théodore Géricault. This 1823 lithograph, part of a suite of images Géricault devoted to the tales, pictures the Giaour.

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## ***From The Giaour: A Fragment of a Turkish Tale***

\* \* \*

Black Hassan from the Haram flies,  
Nor bends on woman's face his eyes,  
440 The unwonted chase<sup>o</sup> each hour employs,  
Yet shares he not the hunter's joys.  
Not thus was Hassan wont to fly  
When Leila dwelt in his Serai.<sup>o</sup>  
Doth Leila there no longer dwell?  
445 That tale can only Hassan tell:  
Strange rumours in our city say  
Upon that eve she fled away;  
When Rhamazan's last sun was set,  
And flashing from each minaret  
450 Millions of lamps proclaim'd the feast  
Of Bairam<sup>1</sup> through the boundless East.  
'Twas then she went as to the bath,  
Which Hassan vainly search'd in wrath,  
But she was flown her master's rage  
455 In likeness of a Georgian page;  
And far beyond the Moslem's power  
Had wrong'd him with the faithless Giaour.  
Somewhat of this had Hassan deem'd,  
But still so fond, so fair she seem'd,  
460 Too well he trusted to the slave  
Whose treachery deserv'd a grave:  
And on that eve had gone to mosque,  
And thence to feast in his kiosk.<sup>2</sup>  
Such is the tale his Nubians<sup>3</sup> tell,

465 Who did not watch their charge too well;  
But others say, that on that night,  
By pale Phingari's<sup>o</sup> trembling light,  
The Giaour upon his jet black steed  
470 Was seen—but seen alone to speed  
With bloody spur along the shore,  
Nor maid nor page behind him bore.

• • • • •

Her eye's dark charm 'twere vain to tell,  
But gaze on that of the Gazelle,  
It will assist thy fancy well,  
475 As large, as languishingly dark,  
But Soul beam'd forth in every spark  
That darted from beneath the lid,  
Bright as the ruby of Giamschid.<sup>4</sup>  
Yea, *Soul*, and should our prophet say  
480 That form was nought but breathing clay,  
By Alla! I would answer nay;  
Though on Al-Sirat's arch I stood,<sup>5</sup>  
Which totters o'er the fiery flood,  
With Paradise within my view,  
485 And all his Houris<sup>o</sup> beckoning through.  
Oh! who young Leila's glance could read  
And keep that portion of his creed<sup>6</sup>  
Which saith, that woman is but dust,  
A soulless toy for tyrant's lust?  
490 On her might Muftis<sup>7</sup> gaze, and own  
That through her eye the Immortal shone—  
On her fair cheek's unfading hue,  
The young pomegranate's blossoms strew  
Their bloom in blushes ever new—  
495 Her hair in hyacinthine flow  
When left to roll its folds below;

As midst her handmaids in the hall  
She stood superior to them all,  
Hath swept the marble where her feet  
500 Gleamed whiter than the mountain sleet  
Ere from the cloud that gave it birth,  
It fell, and caught one stain of earth.  
The cygnet nobly walks the water—  
So moved on earth Circassia's<sup>8</sup> daughter—  
505 The loveliest bird of Franguestan!  
As rears her crest the ruffled Swan,  
And spurns the wave with wings of pride,  
When pass the steps of stranger man  
Along the banks that bound her tide;  
510 Thus rose fair Leila's whiter neck:—  
Thus armed with beauty would she check  
Intrusion's glance, till Folly's gaze  
Shrunk from the charms it meant to praise.  
Thus high and graceful was her gait;  
515 Her heart as tender to her mate—  
Her mate—stern Hassan, who was he?  
Alas! that name was not for thee!

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

Stern Hassan hath a journey ta'en  
With twenty vassals in his train,  
520 Each arm'd as best becomes a man  
With arquebuss<sup>o</sup> and ataghan;<sup>o</sup>  
The chief before, as deck'd for war,  
Bears in his belt the scimitar  
Stain'd with the best of Arnaut<sup>o</sup> blood,  
525 When in the pass the rebels stood,  
And few return'd to tell the tale  
Of what befell in Parne's vale.<sup>9</sup>  
The pistols which his girdle bore  
Were those that once a pasha wore,

530 Which still, though gemm'd and boss'd with gold,  
Even robbers tremble to behold.—  
'Tis said he goes to woo a bride  
More true than her who left his side;  
The faithless slave that broke her bower,  
And, worse than faithless, for a Giaour!—

535

• • • • • • • • • • • • • •

The sun's last rays are on the hill,  
And sparkle in the fountain rill,  
Whose welcome waters cool and clear,  
540 Draw blessings from the mountaineer;  
Here may the loitering merchant Greek  
Find that repose 'twere vain to seek  
In cities lodg'd too near his lord,  
And trembling for his secret hoard—  
545 Here may he rest where none can see,  
In crowds a slave, in deserts free;  
And with forbidden wine may stain  
The bowl a Moslem must not drain.—

• • • • • • • • • • • •

The foremost Tartar's in the gap,  
550 Conspicuous by his yellow cap,  
The rest in lengthening line the while  
Wind slowly through the long defile;  
Above, the mountain rears a peak,  
Where vultures whet the thirsty beak,  
And their's may be a feast to-night,  
555 Shall tempt them down ere morrow's light.  
Beneath, a river's wintry stream  
Has shrunk before the summer beam,  
And left a channel bleak and bare,  
Save shrubs that spring to perish there.

560 Each side the midway path there lay  
Small broken crags of granite gray,  
By time or mountain lightning riven,  
From summits clad in mists of heaven;  
565 For where is he that hath beheld  
The peak of Liakura<sup>1</sup> unveil'd?

• • • • • • • • • • •

They reach the grove of pine at last,  
"Bismillah!<sup>o</sup> now the peril's past;  
For yonder view the opening plain,  
And there we'll prick our steeds amain:"  
570 The Chiaus<sup>o</sup> spake, and as he said,  
A bullet whistled o'er his head;  
The foremost Tartar bites the ground!  
Scarce had they time to check the rein  
Swift from their steeds the riders bound,  
575 But three shall never mount again,  
Unseen the foes that gave the wound,  
The dying ask revenge in vain.  
With steel unsheath'd, and carbines<sup>o</sup> bent,  
Some o'er their courser's harness leant,  
580 Half shelter'd by the steed,  
Some fly behind the nearest rock,  
And there await the coming shock,  
Nor tamely stand to bleed  
Beneath the shaft of foes unseen,  
585 Who dare not quit their craggy screen.  
Stern Hassan only from his horse  
Disdains to light, and keeps his course,  
Till fiery flashes in the van<sup>o</sup>  
Proclaim too sure the robber-clan  
590 Have well secur'd the only way  
Could now avail the promis'd prey;  
Then curl'd his very beard with ire,

And glared his eye with fiercer fire.  
595 "Though far and near the bullets hiss,  
I've scaped a bloodier hour than this."  
And now the foe their covert quit,  
And call his vassals to submit;  
But Hassan's frown and furious word  
Are dreaded more than hostile sword,  
600 Nor of his little band a man  
Resign'd carbine or ataghan—  
Nor raised the craven cry, Amaun!<sup>o</sup>  
In fuller sight, more near and near,  
The lately ambush'd foes appear,  
605 And issuing from the grove advance,  
Some who on battle charger prance.—  
Who leads them on with foreign brand,  
Far flashing in his red right hand?  
" 'Tis he—'tis he—I know him now,  
610 I know him by his pallid brow;  
I know him by the evil eye  
That aids his envious treachery;  
I know him by his jet-black barb,  
Though now array'd in Arnaut garb,  
615 Apostate from his own vile faith,<sup>2</sup>  
It shall not save him from the death;  
'Tis he, well met in any hour,  
Lost Leila's love—accursed Giaour!"

620 As rolls the river into ocean,  
In sable torrent wildly streaming;  
As the sea-tide's opposing motion  
In azure column proudly gleaming,  
Beats back the current many a rood,  
In curling foam and mingling flood;  
625 While eddying whirl, and breaking wave,  
Roused by the blast of winter rave;  
Through sparkling spray in thundering clash,

The lightnings of the waters flash  
In awful whiteness o'er the shore,  
630 That shines and shakes beneath the roar;  
Thus—as the stream and ocean greet,  
With waves that madden as they meet—  
Thus join the bands whom mutual wrong,  
And fate and fury drive along.  
635 The bickering sabres' shivering jar,  
And pealing wide—or ringing near  
Its echoes on the throbbing ear  
The deathshot hissing from afar—  
The shock—the shout—the groan of war—  
640 Reverberate along that vale,  
More suited to the shepherd's tale:  
Though few the numbers—their's the strife,  
That neither spares nor speaks for life!  
Ah! fondly youthful hearts can press,  
645 To seize and share the dear caress;  
But Love itself could never pant  
For all that Beauty sighs to grant,  
With half the fervour Hate bestows  
Upon the last embrace of foes,  
650 When grappling in the fight they fold  
Those arms that ne'er shall lose their hold.  
Friends meet to part—Love laughs at faith;—  
True foes, once met, are joined till death!

\* \* \*

1813

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Feast day that in the Islamic calendar ends Ramadan (or Rhamazan), the month of fasting. [Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Pavilion.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Men from Sudan. European accounts often identified them as the guards placed over the harem women.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The celebrated fabulous ruby of Sultan Giamschid, the embellisher of Ishtakhar [*Byron's note*, which continues several lines further, tracing, as though in parody of the era's philological researchers, the pronunciation of *Giamschid*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Al-Sirat, the bridge of breadth less than the thread of a famished spider, over which the Mussulmans must *skate* into Paradise, to which it is the only entrance . . . [*Byron's note*, which continues, quite jokily, with comments on the hellish region underneath the bridge].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Here Byron's long note records, and rejects as popular misconception, the belief that Islamic doctrine denied that women had souls.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Administrators of Sharia law.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Circassia, also called Franguestan (line 506), is a region in the Caucasus mountains, considered the border between Europe and Asia.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Valley beside Mount Parnitha, a densely forested mountain north of Athens. *The Giaour* is set in Turkish-occupied Greece, contested territory that in the early 18th century, when these adventures are meant to have taken place, was also coveted by the Venetian Empire.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: A mountain in Greece.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: As leader of a band of Albanian (Arnaut) mercenaries, the Giaour betrays his own faith, Christianity.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *hunt*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *harem*[Return to reference °](#)

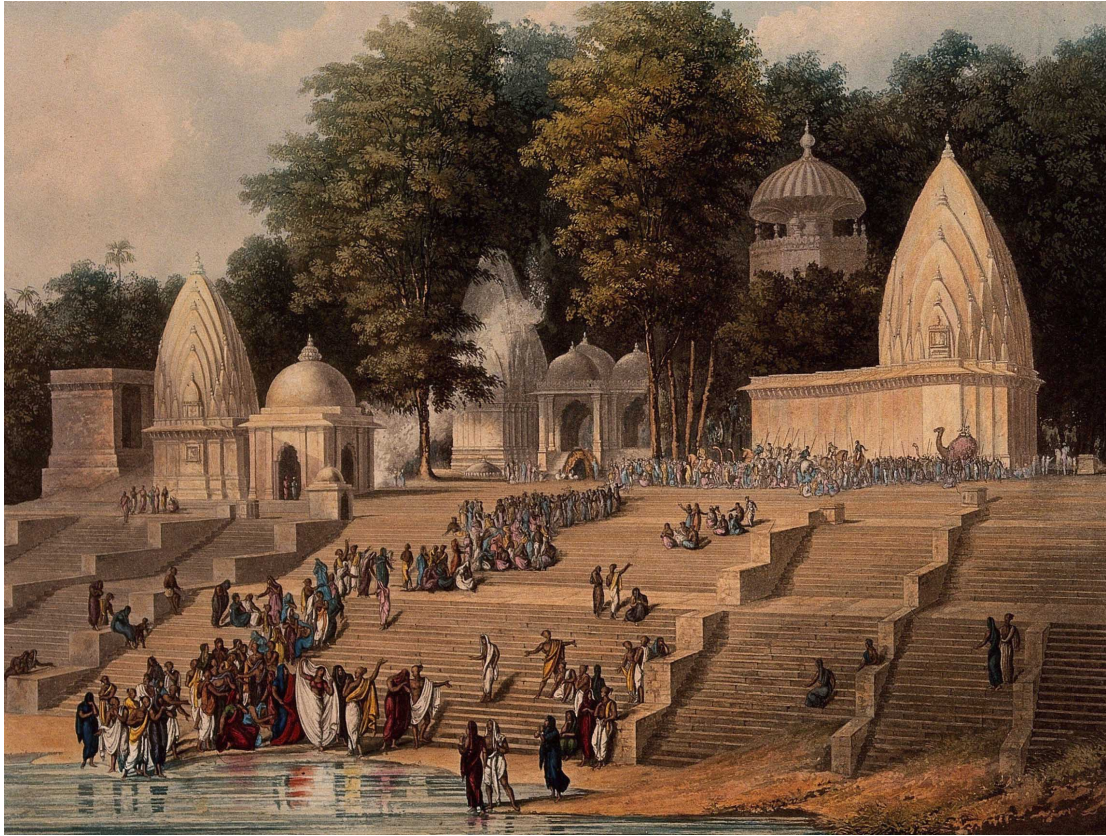


- °: *moon's*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *beautiful women*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gun* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sword*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Albanian*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *narrow passage*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *In Allah's name*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Turkish sergeant*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *firearms*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *front*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Pardon*[Return to reference](#) °

## LETITIA ELIZABETH LANDON

This much reprinted poem was originally published in the annual giftbook *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook*, which Landon edited between 1832 and 1838. (For more about the poet, see [p. 1035](#), below.) On its first appearance, the poem was presented as her literary accompaniment to an aquatint the *Scrapbook* had reprinted from an Indian travelogue by the infantry officer and amateur artist Robert Melville Grindlay.

*Suttee* or *sati*, the Hindu practice in which widows were immolated on their husbands' funeral pyres, focused much of the early nineteenth-century controversy over whether the British ought to intervene into the culture of their colony. An anti-sati movement also grew up at this time among native social reformers, led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833). The practice was finally banned by the British government in 1829. Long after, however, English literature—not least literature by women—continued to gravitate toward sati as source material, both exploiting it as an occasion for Gothic horror and idealizing the dying widow as a willing martyr to altruistic love. Landon herself wrote about sati multiple times, before and after the ban.



**"Preparations for a Suttee":** one of the aquatint views included in Robert Melville Grindlay's lavish picture book *Scenery, Costumes, and Architecture Chiefly on the Western Side of India* (published in six parts between 1826 and 1830). Grindlay went to India as a teenager and served in the East India Company's army from 1804 to 1820.

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## Immolation of a Hindoo Widow

Gather her raven hair in one rich cluster,  
Let the white champac<sup>o</sup> light it, as a star  
Gives to the dusky night a sudden lustre,  
Shining afar.

5 Shed fragrant oils upon her fragrant bosom,  
Until the breathing air around grows sweet;  
Scatter the languid jasmine's yellow blossom  
Beneath her feet.

10 Those small white feet are bare—too soft are they  
To tread on aught but flowers; and there is roll'd  
Round the slight ankle, meet for such display,  
The band of gold.

15 Chains and bright stones are on her arms and neck;  
What pleasant vanities are linked with them,  
Of happy hours, which youth delights to deck  
With gold and gem.

20 She comes! So comes the Moon, when she has  
found  
A silvery path wherein thro' heaven to glide.  
Fling the white veil—a summer cloud—around;  
She is a bride!

And yet the crowd that gather at her side  
Are pale, and every gazer holds his breath.  
Eyes fill with tears unbidden, for the bride—  
The bride of Death!

She gives away the garland from her hair,

25      She gives the gems that she will wear no more;  
All the affections, whose love-signs they were,  
Are gone before.

30      The red pile blazes—let the bride ascend,  
And lay her head upon her husband's heart,  
Now in a perfect unison to blend—  
   No more to part.

1836

## Notes

- °: *magnolia*[Return to reference °](#)

# **JOHN KEATS**

## **1795–1821**

John Keats's father was head stableman at a London livery stable; he married his employer's daughter and inherited the business. The poet's mother, by all reports, was an affectionate but negligent parent to her children; remarrying almost immediately after a fall from a horse killed her first husband, she left the eight-year-old John (her firstborn), his brothers, and a sister with their grandmother and did not reenter their lives for four years. The year before his father's death, Keats had been sent to the Reverend John Clarke's private school at Enfield, famous for its progressive curriculum, where he was a noisy, high-spirited boy; despite his small stature (when full-grown, he was barely over five feet in height), he distinguished himself in sports and fistfights. Here he had the good fortune to have as a mentor Charles Cowden Clarke, son of the headmaster, who later became a writer and an editor; he encouraged Keats's passion for reading and, both at school and in the course of their later friendship, introduced him to Spenser and other poets, to music, and to the theater.

When Keats's mother returned to her children, she was already ill, and in 1810 she died of tuberculosis. Although the livery stable had prospered, and £8,000 had been left in trust to the children by Keats's grandmother, the estate remained tied up in the law courts for all of Keats's lifetime. The children's guardian, Richard Abbey, an unimaginative and practical-minded businessman, took Keats out of

school at the age of fifteen and bound him apprentice to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon and apothecary at Edmonton. In 1815 Keats carried on his medical studies at Guy's Hospital, London, and the next year qualified to practice as an apothecary-surgeon—but almost immediately, over his guardian's protests, he abandoned medicine for poetry.

This decision was influenced by Keats's friendship with Leigh Hunt, then editor of the *Examiner* and a leading political radical, poet, and prolific writer of criticism and periodical essays. Hunt, the first successful author of Keats's acquaintance, added his enthusiastic encouragement of Keats's poetic efforts to that of Clarke. More important, he introduced him to writers greater than Hunt himself—William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Percy Shelley—as well as to Benjamin Robert Haydon, painter of grandiose historical and religious canvases. Through Hunt, Keats also met John Hamilton Reynolds and then Charles Wentworth Dilke and Charles Brown, who became his intimate friends and provided him with an essential circumstance for a fledgling poet: a sympathetic and appreciative audience.

The rapidity and sureness of Keats's development has no match. Although he did not begin writing poetry until his eighteenth year, by 1816 in the bold sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" he had found his voice. Later that same year he wrote "Sleep and Poetry," in which he laid out for himself a program deliberately modeled on the careers of the greatest poets, asking only

for ten years, that I may overwhelm  
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed  
That my own soul has to itself decreed.

For even while his health was good, Keats felt a foreboding of early death and applied himself to his art with a desperate urgency. In 1817 he went on to compose *Endymion*, an ambitious undertaking of more than four thousand lines. It is a rich allegory of a mortal's quest for an ideal feminine counterpart and a flawless happiness beyond earthly possibility; in a number of passages, it already

exhibits the sure movement and phrasing of his mature poetic style. But Keats's critical judgment and aspiration exceeded his achievement: long before he completed it, he declared impatiently that he carried on with the "slipshod" *Endymion* only as a "trial of invention" and began to block out *Hyperion*, conceived on the model of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in that most demanding of forms, the epic poem. His success in achieving the Miltonic manner is one of the reasons why Keats abandoned *Hyperion* before it was finished, for he recognized that he was uncommonly susceptible to poetic influences and regarded this as a threat to his individuality. "I will write independently," he insisted. "The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man." He had refused the chance of intimacy with Shelley "that I might have my own unfettered scope"; he had broken away from Leigh Hunt's influence lest he get "the reputation of Hunt's élève [pupil]"; now he shied away from domination by Milton's powerfully infectious style.

In sentimental, later nineteenth-century accounts of "poor Keats," 1818 was cast as the year in which this rising genius, already frail and sensitive, was mortally crushed by vicious reviews. Percy Shelley helped initiate this myth in *Adonais*, which describes Keats as "a pale flower." Byron, who did not like Keats's verse, put it unsentimentally: Keats, he wrote, was "snuffed out by an article." It is true that the critics were brutal to Keats, those associated with the Tory journals especially. For these critics his poetry proved an irresistible target precisely because it had been promoted by the radical Hunt.

*Endymion* was mauled in the *Quarterly Review*, and one of the articles on "the Cockney School of Poetry" that appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* condemned Keats as hopelessly vulgar, a writer who wanted to be a poet of nature but thought, as a social-climbing, undereducated Londoner would, that nature was "flowers seen in window-pots." "It is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet," the reviewer scolded: "so back to the shop Mr John." Keats had for his own part the good sense to recognize that the attacks were motivated by political prejudice and class snobbery, and he had already passed his own severe judgment



on *Endymion*: "My own domestic criticism," he said, "has given me pain without comparison beyond what *Blackwood* or the *Quarterly* could possibly inflict." More important was the financial distress of his brother George and his young bride, who emigrated to Kentucky and lost their money in an ill-advised investment. Keats, short of funds and needing to supplement the family income, had now to find ways to make money from his writing: he turned to journalism and began planning plays. His brother Tom contracted tuberculosis, and the poet, in devoted attendance, helplessly watched him waste away until his death that December. In the summer of that year, Keats had taken a strenuous walking tour in the English Lake District, Scotland, and Ireland. It was a glorious adventure but a totally exhausting one in wet, cold weather, and he returned in August with a chronically ulcerated throat made increasingly ominous by the shadow of the tuberculosis that had killed his mother and brother. And in the late fall of that same year, Keats fell unwillingly but deeply in love with Fanny Brawne, the eighteen-year-old girl next door. They became engaged, knowing, though, that Keats's poverty and worsening health might well make their marriage impossible.

In this period of turmoil, Keats achieved the culmination of his brief poetic career. Between January and September of 1819, masterpiece followed masterpiece in astonishing succession: *The Eve of St. Agnes*, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," all of the "great odes," *Lamia*, and a sufficient number of fine sonnets to make him, with Wordsworth, the major Romantic craftsman in that form. All of these poems possess the distinctive qualities of the work of Keats's maturity: a slow-paced, gracious movement; a concreteness of description in which all the senses—tactile, gustatory, kinetic, visceral, as well as visual and auditory—combine to give the total apprehension of an experience; a delight at the sheer existence of things outside himself, the poet seeming to lose his own identity in a total identification with the object he contemplates; and a concentrated felicity of phrasing that reminded his friends, as it has many critics since, of the language of Shakespeare. Under the richly sensuous surface, we find Keats's characteristic presentation of all

experience as a tangle of inseparable but irreconcilable opposites. He finds melancholy in delight and pleasure in pain; he feels the highest intensity of love as an approximation to death; he inclines equally toward a life of indolence and "sensation" and toward a life of thought; he is aware both of the attraction of an imaginative dream world without "disagreeables" and the remorseless pressure of the actual; he aspires at the same time to aesthetic detachment and to social responsibility.

His letters, hardly less remarkable than his poetry, show that Keats felt on his pulses the conflicts he dramatized in his major poems. Above all, they reveal him wrestling with the problem of evil and suffering—what to make of our lives in the discovery that "the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness and oppression." To the end of his life, he refused to seek solace for the complexity and contradictions of experience either in the abstractions of inherited philosophical doctrines or in the absolutes of a religious creed. At the close of his poetic career, in the latter part of 1819, Keats began to rework the epic *Hyperion* into the form of a dream vision that he called *The Fall of Hyperion*. In the introductory section of this fragment the poet is told by the prophetess Moneta that he has hitherto been merely a dreamer; he must know that

The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes,

and that the height of poetry can be reached only by

those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

He was seemingly planning to undertake a new direction and subject matter, when illness and death intervened.

On the night of February 3, 1820, he coughed up blood. As a physician he refused to evade the truth: "I cannot be deceived in that colour; that drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die." That spring and summer a series of hemorrhages rapidly weakened

him. In the autumn he allowed himself to be persuaded to seek the milder climate of Italy in the company of Joseph Severn, a young painter, but these last months were only what he called "a posthumous existence." He died in Rome on February 23, 1821, and was buried in the Protestant Cemetery, where Mary and Percy Shelley had already interred their little son William, and where Percy's ashes, too, would be deposited in 1822. At times the agony of his disease, the seeming frustration of his hopes for great poetic achievement, and the despair of his passion for Fanny Brawne compelled even Keats's brave spirit to bitterness and jealousy, but he always recovered his gallantry. His last letter, written to Charles Brown, concludes: "I can scarcely bid you good bye even in a letter. I always made an awkward bow. God bless you! John Keats."

No one can read Keats's poems and letters without sensing the tragic waste of an extraordinary intellect and genius cut off so early. What he might have done is beyond conjecture; what we do know is that his poetry, when he stopped writing at the age of twenty-four, exceeds the accomplishment at the same age of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton.

The texts reprinted here are based on Jack Stillinger's edition, *The Poems of John Keats* (1978).

# On First Looking into Chapman's Homer<sup>1</sup>

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
5 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;<sup>2</sup>  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene<sup>3</sup>  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;<sup>o</sup>  
10 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Oct. 1816

1816

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

Keats's mentor Charles Cowden Clarke introduced him to Homer in the robust translation by the Elizabethan poet and dramatist George Chapman. They read through the night, and Keats walked home at dawn. This sonnet reached Clarke by the ten o'clock mail that same morning. Readers have often assumed Keats got history wrong in this sonnet's sestet and confused Balboa, the first European explorer to see the Pacific, with Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico. But as Charles Rzepka pointed out in 2002, there is strictly speaking no reason to suppose Keats is concerned with original discoveries here (his Cortez stares at, rather than discovers, the Pacific):

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Realm, feudal possession.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Clear expanse of air.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *view*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***From Sleep and Poetry*<sup>1</sup>**

### **["O FOR TEN YEARS"]**

O for ten years, that I may overwhelm  
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed  
That my own soul has to itself decreed.  
Then will I pass the countries that I see  
In long perspective, and continually  
100 Taste their pure fountains. First the realm I'll pass  
Of Flora, and old Pan:<sup>2</sup> sleep in the grass,  
Feed upon apples red, and strawberries,  
And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees;  
Catch the white-handed nymphs in shady places,  
105 To woo sweet kisses from averted faces,—  
Play with their fingers, touch their shoulders white  
Into a pretty shrinking with a bite  
As hard as lips can make it: till agreed,  
A lovely tale of human life we'll read.  
110 And one will teach a tame dove how it best  
May fan the cool air gently o'er my rest;  
Another, bending o'er her nimble tread,  
Will set a green robe floating round her head,  
And still will dance with ever varied ease,  
115 Smiling upon the flowers and the trees:  
Another will entice me on, and on  
Through almond blossoms and rich cinnamon;  
Till in the bosom of a leafy world  
We rest in silence, like two gems upcurl'd  
120 In the recesses of a pearly shell.

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?

Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
Of human hearts: for lo! I see afar,  
125 O'er sailing the blue cragginess, a car<sup>o</sup>  
And steeds with streamy manes—the charioteer<sup>3</sup>  
Looks out upon the winds with glorious fear:  
And now the numerous tramlings quiver lightly  
Along a huge cloud's ridge; and now with sprightly  
130 Wheel downward come they into fresher skies,  
Tipt round with silver from the sun's bright eyes.  
Still downward with capacious whirl they glide;  
And now I see them on a green-hill's side  
In breezy rest among the nodding stalks.  
135 The charioteer with wond'rous gesture talks  
To the trees and mountains; and there soon appear  
Shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear,  
Passing along before a dusky space  
Made by some mighty oaks: as they would chase  
140 Some ever-fleeting music on they sweep.  
Lo! how they murmur, laugh, and smile, and weep:  
Some with upholden hand and mouth severe;  
Some with their faces muffled to the ear  
Between their arms; some, clear in youthful bloom,  
145 Go glad and smilingly athwart<sup>o</sup> the gloom;  
Some looking back, and some with upward gaze;  
Yes, thousands in a thousand different ways  
Flit onward—now a lovely wreath of girls  
Dancing their sleek hair into tangled curls;  
150 And now broad wings. Most awfully intent,  
The driver of those steeds is forward bent,  
And seems to listen: O that I might know  
All that he writes with such a hurrying glow.

155 The visions all are fled—the car is fled  
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead  
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,

160

And, like a muddy stream, would bear along  
My soul to nothingness: but I will strive  
Against all doubtings, and will keep alive  
The thought of that same chariot, and the strange  
Journey it went.

\* \* \*

Oct.–Dec. 1816

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
At the age of twenty-one, Keats set himself a regimen of poetic training modeled on the course followed by the greatest poets. Virgil had established the pattern of beginning with pastoral writing and proceeding gradually to the point at which he was ready to undertake the epic, and this pattern had been deliberately followed by Spenser and Milton. Keats's version of this program, as he describes it here, is to begin with the realm "of Flora, and old Pan" (line 102) and, within ten years, to climb up to the level of poetry dealing with "the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (lines 124–25). The program Keats set himself is illuminated by his analysis of [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, the carefree pastoral world. Flora was the Roman goddess of flowers. Pan was the Greek god of pastures, woods, and animal life. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The description that follows recalls the traditional portrayal of Apollo, god of the sun and poetry, and represents the higher poetic imagination, which bodies forth the matters "of delight, of mystery, and fear" (line 138) that characterize the grander poetic genres. [Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes



- °: *chariot* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *against* [Return to reference](#) °

# On Seeing the Elgin Marbles<sup>1</sup>

My spirit is too weak—mortality  
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,  
And each imagined pinnacle and steep  
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die  
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.  
5 Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep  
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep  
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.  
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain  
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;  
10 So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,  
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude  
Wasting of old time—with a billowy main<sup>o</sup>—  
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

Mar. 1 or 2, 1817

1817

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Lord Elgin had brought to England in 1806 many of the marble statues and friezes that adorned the Parthenon at Athens. In 1817 Keats, along with his artist friend Haydon, viewed the marbles at the British Museum, which had just purchased them, an acquisition that was and remains controversial. Keats's sonnet first appeared on the same day in both Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and, through Keats's friend Reynolds, the *Champion*, and then was reprinted in Haydon's magazine *Annals of the Fine Arts*.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *ocean*[Return to reference °](#)

# ***From Endymion: A Poetic Romance***<sup>1</sup>

"The stretched metre of an antique song"

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1:

This poem of more than four thousand lines (based on the classical myth of a mortal beloved by the goddess of the moon) tells of Endymion's long and agonized search for an immortal goddess whom he had seen in several visions. In the course of his wanderings, he comes upon an Indian maid who had been abandoned by the followers of Bacchus, god of wine and revelry. To his utter despair, he succumbs to a sensual passion for her, in apparent betrayal of his love for his heavenly ideal. The conclusion to Keats's "romance" offers a way of resolving this opposition, which runs throughout the poem, between the inevitably mortal pleasures of this world

[Return to reference 1](#)

# INSCRIBED TO THE MEMORY OF THOMAS CHATTERTON

## *Preface*

Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public.

What manner I mean, will be quite clear to the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The two first books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a year's castigation would do them any good;—it will not: the foundations are too sandy. It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live.

This may be speaking too presumptuously, and may deserve a punishment: but no feeling man will be forward to inflict it: he will leave me alone, with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. This is not written with the least atom of purpose to forestall criticisms of course, but from the desire I have to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.

I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece,<sup>2</sup> and dulled its brightness: for I wish to try once more,<sup>3</sup> before I bid it farewell.

Teignmouth, April 10, 1818

## Endnotes

- Note 2: In 1820 an anonymous reviewer of Keats's final volume of poems cited this phrase and, in a complaint that suggests the political charge that the poetic use of classical mythology could carry at this time, wrote disparagingly of "the nonsense that Mr. Keats . . . and Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley, and some of the poets about town, have been talking of 'the beautiful mythology of Greece' "; "To some persons . . . that mythology comes recommended chiefly by its grossness—its alliance to the sensitive pleasures which belong to the animal."[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In *Hyperion*, which Keats was already planning.[Return to reference 3](#)

**From *Book 1***

## ["A THING OF BEAUTY"]

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep  
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
5 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet  
breathing.  
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing  
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,  
Spite<sup>o</sup> of despondence, of the inhuman dearth  
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,  
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways  
10 Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,  
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall  
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,  
Trees old, and young sprouting a shady boon  
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils  
15 With the green world they live in; and clear rills<sup>o</sup>  
That for themselves a cooling covert make  
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,<sup>o</sup>  
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:  
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms<sup>o</sup>  
20 We have imagined for the mighty dead;  
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:  
An endless fountain of immortal drink,  
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

25 Nor do we merely feel these essences  
For one short hour; no, even as the trees  
That whisper round a temple become soon  
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,  
The passion poesy, glories infinite,  
Haunt us till they become a cheering light

30       Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,  
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'ercast,  
They alway must be with us, or we die.

          Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I  
Will trace the story of Endymion.  
35       The very music of the name has gone  
Into my being, and each pleasant scene  
Is growing fresh before me as the green  
Of our own vallies. \* \* \*

## Notes

- °: *Despite*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *small streams*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thicket*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *judgments*[Return to reference °](#)



## [THE "PLEASURE THERMOMETER"]

770        "Peona!<sup>4</sup> ever have I long'd to slake  
My thirst for the world's praises: nothing base,  
No merely slumberous phantasm, could unlace  
The stubborn canvas for my voyage prepar'd—  
Though now 'tis tatter'd; leaving my bark bar'd  
And sullenly drifting: yet my higher hope  
775        Is of too wide, too rainbow-large a scope,  
To fret at myriads of earthly wrecks.  
Wherein lies happiness? In that which beck<sup>o</sup>  
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,  
A fellowship with essence; till we shine,  
780        Full alchemiz'd,<sup>5</sup> and free of space. Behold  
The clear religion of heaven! Fold  
A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,  
And soothe thy lips: hist,<sup>o</sup> when the airy stress  
Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,  
And with a sympathetic touch unbinds  
785        Eolian<sup>6</sup> magic from their lucid wombs:  
Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs;  
Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;  
Ghosts of melodious prophecyings rave  
Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot;  
790        Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit,<sup>7</sup>  
Where long ago a giant battle was;  
And, from the turf, a lullaby doth pass  
In every place where infant Orpheus<sup>8</sup> slept.  
795        Feel we these things?—that moment have we stept  
Into a sort of oneness, and our state  
Is like a floating spirit's. But there are  
Richer entanglements, enthrallments far  
More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,

800 To the chief intensity: the crown of these  
Is made of love and friendship, and sits high  
Upon the forehead of humanity.  
All its more ponderous and bulky worth  
Is friendship, whence there ever issues forth  
805 A steady splendour; but at the tip-top  
There hangs by unseen film, an orb'd drop  
Of light, and that is love: its influence,  
Thrown in our eyes, genders<sup>o</sup> a novel sense,  
At which we start and fret; till in the end,  
810 Melting into its radiance, we blend,  
Mingle, and so become a part of it,—  
Nor with aught else can our souls interknit  
So wingedly: when we combine therewith,  
Life's self is nourish'd by its proper pith,<sup>9</sup>  
And we are nurtured like a pelican brood.<sup>1</sup>  
815 Aye, so delicious is the unsating food,<sup>2</sup>  
That men, who might have tower'd in the van<sup>o</sup>  
Of all the congregated world, to fan  
And winnow from the coming step of time  
All chaff of custom, wipe away all slime  
820 Left by men-slugs and human serpentry,  
Have been content to let occasion die,  
Whilst they did sleep in love's elysium.<sup>o</sup>  
And, truly, I would rather be struck dumb,  
Than speak against this ardent listlessness:  
825 For I have ever thought that it might bless  
The world with benefits unknowingly;  
As does the nightingale, upperched high,  
And cloister'd among cool and bunched leaves—  
She sings but to her love, nor e'er conceives  
830 How tiptoe Night holds back her dark-grey hood.<sup>3</sup>  
Just so may love, although 'tis understood  
The mere commingling of passionate breath,  
Produce more than our searching witnesseth:

835 What I know not: but who, of men, can tell  
That flowers would bloom, or that green fruit would  
swell  
To melting pulp, that fish would have bright mail,  
The earth its dower of river, wood, and vale,  
The meadows runnels, runnels pebble-stones,  
840 The seed its harvest, or the lute its tones,  
Tones ravishment, or ravishment its sweet,  
If human souls did never kiss and greet?

“Now, if this earthly love has power to make  
Men’s being mortal, immortal; to shake  
Ambition from their memories, and brim  
845 Their measure of content; what merest whim,  
Seems all this poor endeavour after fame,  
To one, who keeps within his stedfast aim  
A love immortal, an immortal too.  
Look not so wilder’d; for these things are true,  
850 And never can be born of atomies<sup>o</sup>  
That buzz about our slumbers, like brain-flies,  
Leaving us fancy-sick. No, no, I’m sure,  
My restless spirit never could endure  
To brood so long upon one luxury,  
855 Unless it did, though fearfully, espy  
A hope beyond the shadow of a dream.”

Apr.–Nov. 1817

1818

## Endnotes

- Note 4:

The sister to whom Endymion confides his troubles. Of lines 769–857 Keats said to his publisher, John Taylor: “When I wrote it, it was the regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth. My having written that Argument will perhaps be of the greatest Service to me of anything I ever did—It set before me at once the gradations of Happiness even like a kind of Pleasur

Thermometer, and is my first step towards the chief attempt in the Drama—the playing of different Natures with Joy and Sorrow.” The gradations on this “Pleasure Thermometer” mark the stages on the way to what Keats calls “happiness” (line 77);

his secular version of the religious concept of “felicitas” that is

[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Transformed by alchemy from a base to a precious metal.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: From Aeolus, god of winds.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Make a sound.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The musician of Greek legend, whose beautiful music could move even inanimate things.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Its own elemental substance.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Young pelicans were once thought to feed on their mother’s flesh. In a parallel way our life is nourished by another’s life, with which it fuses in love.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Food that never satiates, that never ceases to satisfy.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, in order to hear better.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *beckons*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *listen*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *engenders*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *forefront*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *heaven*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mites*[Return to reference °](#)

# On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again<sup>1</sup>

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!  
Fair plumed syren,<sup>2</sup> queen of far-away!  
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,  
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.  
Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute  
5       Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay  
      Must I burn through; once more humbly assay<sup>o</sup>  
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.  
Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,<sup>3</sup>  
      Begetters of our deep eternal theme!  
10       When through the old oak forest I am gone,  
      Let me not wander in a barren dream:  
But, when I am consumed in the fire,  
Give me new phoenix<sup>4</sup> wings to fly at my desire.

Jan. 22, 1818

1838

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Keats pauses, while revising *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, to read again Shakespeare's great tragedy. The word *syren* (line 2) indicates Keats's feeling that "Romance" was enticing him from the poet's prime duty, to deal with "the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (*Sleep and Poetry*, lines 124–25). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Syrens (sirens) were sea nymphs whose singing lured listeners to their deaths. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Old name for England. *King Lear* is set in Celtic Britain. [Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: The fabulous bird that periodically burns itself to death to rise anew from the ashes.[Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *test*[Return to reference °](#)

# When I have fears that I may cease to be<sup>1</sup>

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
Before high piled books, in charactry,<sup>2</sup>  
Hold like rich garnerers the full ripen'd grain;  
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
5 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
10 Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Jan. 1818

1848

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The first, and one of the most successful, of Keats's attempts at the sonnet in the Shakespearean rhyme scheme.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Characters; printed letters of the alphabet.[Return to reference 2](#)

## To Homer

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,  
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,<sup>1</sup>  
As one who sits ashore and longs perchance  
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.  
5 So wast thou blind;—but then the veil was rent,  
For Jove uncurtain'd heaven to let thee live,  
And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,  
And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;  
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,  
And precipices show untrodden green,  
10 There is a budding morrow in midnight,  
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;  
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel  
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.<sup>2</sup>

1818

1848

### Endnotes

- Note 1: A group of islands in the Aegean Sea, off Greece. Keats's allusion is to his ignorance of the Greek language. Schooling in Greek was a badge of gentlemanly identity in the period.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In late pagan cults Diana was worshiped as a three-figured goddess, the deity of nature and of the moon as well as the queen of Hell. The "triple sight" that blind Homer paradoxically commands is of these three regions and also of heaven, sea, and Earth (the realms of Jove, Neptune, and Pan, lines 6–8).[Return to reference 2](#)



# The Eve of St. Agnes<sup>1</sup>

## 1

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!  
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;  
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen  
grass,  
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:  
5 Numb were the Beadsman's<sup>2</sup> fingers, while he told  
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,  
Like pious incense from a censer old,  
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,  
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he  
saith.

## 2

10 His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;  
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,  
And back returneth, meagre,<sup>o</sup> barefoot, wan,  
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:  
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,  
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:  
15 Knights, ladies, praying in dumb<sup>o</sup> orat'ries,<sup>o</sup>  
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails  
To think<sup>3</sup> how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

## 3

20 Northward he turneth through a little door,  
And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue  
Flatter'd<sup>o</sup> to tears this aged man and poor;

But no—already had his deathbell rung;  
The joys of all his life were said and sung:  
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve:  
Another way he went, and soon among  
25 Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,<sup>o</sup>  
And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve.

#### 4

That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft;  
And so it chanc'd, for many a door was wide,  
From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft,  
30 The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:  
The level chambers, ready with their pride,<sup>o</sup>  
Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:  
The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,  
Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,  
35 With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on  
their breasts.

#### 5

At length burst in the argent revelry,<sup>4</sup>  
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,  
Numerous as shadows haunting fairily  
The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay  
40 Of old romance.<sup>o</sup> These let us wish away,  
And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,  
Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,  
On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,  
45 As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

#### 6

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,  
Young virgins might have visions of delight,

And soft adorings from their loves receive  
Upon the honey'd middle of the night,  
If ceremonies due they did aright;  
50 As, supperless to bed they must retire,  
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;  
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require  
Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.

## 7

Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline:  
55 The music, yearning like a god in pain,  
She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine,  
Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train<sup>5</sup>  
Pass by—she heeded not at all: in vain  
Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,  
60 And back retir'd, not cool'd by high disdain;  
But she saw not: her heart was elsewhere:  
She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the  
year.

## 8

She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes,  
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short:  
65 The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs  
Amid the timbrels,<sup>o</sup> and the throng'd resort  
Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;  
'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,  
Hoodwink'd<sup>6</sup> with faery fancy; all amort,  
70 Save to St. Agnes<sup>7</sup> and her lambs unshorn,<sup>8</sup>  
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn.

## 9

So, purposing each moment to retire,

75 She linger'd still. Meantime, across the moors,  
Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire  
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,  
Buttress'd from moonlight,<sup>9</sup> stands he, and  
implores  
All saints to give him sight of Madeline,  
But for one moment in the tedious hours,  
That he might gaze and worship all unseen;  
80 Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such  
things have been.

## 10

85 He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell:  
All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords  
Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel:  
For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,  
Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,  
Whose very dogs would execrations howl  
Against his lineage: not one breast affords  
Him any mercy, in that mansion foul,  
90 Save one old beldame,<sup>1</sup> weak in body and in soul.

## 11

Ah, happy chance! the aged creature came,  
Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,<sup>o</sup>  
To where he stood, hid from the torch's flame,  
Behind a broad hall-pillar, far beyond  
95 The sound of merriment and chorus bland:<sup>o</sup>  
He startled her; but soon she knew his face,  
And grasp'd his fingers in her palsied hand,  
Saying, "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;  
They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty  
race!

## 12

100        "Get hence! get hence! there's dwarfish  
Hildebrand;  
He had a fever late, and in the fit  
He cursed thee and thine, both house and land:  
Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit  
More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me! flit!  
105        Flit like a ghost away."—"Ah, Gossip<sup>2</sup> dear,  
We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,  
And tell me how"—"Good Saints! not here, not  
here;  
Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy  
bier."<sup>o</sup>

## 13

110        He follow'd through a lowly arched way,  
Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume,  
And as she mutter'd "Well-a—well-a-day!"  
He found him in a little moonlight room,  
Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb.  
"Now tell me where is Madeline," said he,  
115        "O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom  
Which none but secret sisterhood may see,  
When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously."

## 14

120        "St. Agnes! Ah! it is St. Agnes' Eve—  
Yet men will murder upon holy days:  
Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,<sup>3</sup>  
And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,  
To venture so: it fills me with amaze  
To see thee, Porphyro!—St. Agnes' Eve!  
God's help! my lady fair the conjuror plays<sup>4</sup>

125        This very night: good angels her deceive!  
But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle<sup>o</sup> time to grieve."

## 15

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,  
While Porphyro upon her face doth look,  
Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone  
Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,  
130        As spectacl'd she sits in chimney nook.  
But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she told  
His lady's purpose; and he scarce could brook<sup>o</sup>  
Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,  
And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.  
135

## 16

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,  
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart  
Made purple riot: then doth he propose  
A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:  
140        "A cruel man and impious thou art:  
Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream  
Alone with her good angels, far apart  
From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem  
Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst  
seem."

## 17

145        "I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,"  
Quoth Porphyro: "O may I ne'er find grace  
When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,  
If one of her soft ringlets I displace,  
Or look with ruffian passion in her face:  
Good Angela, believe me by these tears;  
Or I will, even in a moment's space,

150       Awake, with horrid shout, my foemen's ears,  
And beard<sup>o</sup> them, though they be more fang'd than  
          wolves and bears."

## 18

155       "Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?  
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,  
Whose passing-bell<sup>o</sup> may ere the midnight toll;  
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,  
Were never miss'd."—Thus plaining,<sup>o</sup> doth she  
bring  
A gentler speech from burning Porphyro;  
So woful, and of such deep sorrowing,  
160       That Angela gives promise she will do  
Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.<sup>5</sup>

## 19

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,  
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide  
Him in a closet, of such privacy  
165       That he might see her beauty unespied,  
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,  
While legion'd fairies pac'd the coverlet,  
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.  
Never on such a night have lovers met,  
170       Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.<sup>6</sup>

## 20

"It shall be as thou wishest," said the Dame:  
"All cates<sup>o</sup> and dainties shall be stored there  
Quickly on this feast-night: by the tambour frame<sup>7</sup>  
Her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,  
175       For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare

On such a catering trust my dizzy head.  
Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer  
The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,  
180 Or may I never leave my grave among the dead."

## 21

So saying, she hobbled off with busy fear.  
The lover's endless minutes slowly pass'd;  
The dame return'd, and whisper'd in his ear  
To follow her; with aged eyes aghast  
185 From fright of dim espial. Safe at last,  
Through many a dusky gallery, they gain<sub>o</sub>  
The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;  
Where Porphyro took covert, pleas'd amain.<sub>o</sub>  
His poor guide hurried back with agues<sub>o</sub> in her brain.

## 22

Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,  
190 Old Angela was feeling for the stair,  
When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid,  
Rose, like a mission'd spirit,<sub>8</sub> unaware:  
With silver taper's light, and pious care,  
She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led  
195 To a safe level matting. Now prepare,  
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;  
She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd<sub>o</sub>  
and fled.

## 23

Out went the taper as she hurried in;  
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:  
200 She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin  
To spirits of the air, and visions wide:



No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!  
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,  
Paining with eloquence her balmy side;  
205 As though a tongueless nightingale<sup>9</sup> should swell  
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.

## 24

A casement<sup>o</sup> high and triple-arch'd there was,  
All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,  
210 And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;  
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,  
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,  
215 A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens  
and kings.<sup>1</sup>

## 25

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
And threw warm gules<sup>o</sup> on Madeline's fair breast,  
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;<sup>o</sup>  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
220 And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
And on her hair a glory,<sup>o</sup> like a saint:  
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,  
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:  
225 She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

## 26

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,  
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;<sup>2</sup>  
Uncclasps her warmed jewels one by one;

Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees  
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:  
230 Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,  
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,  
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,  
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

## 27

Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,  
235 In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd<sup>3</sup> she lay,  
Until the poppi'd warmth of sleep oppress'd  
Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;  
Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;  
Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;  
240 Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;<sup>4</sup>  
Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,  
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

## 28

Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced,  
Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress,  
245 And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced  
To wake into a slumberous tenderness;  
Which when he heard, that minute did he bless,  
And breath'd himself: then from the closet crept,  
Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,  
250 And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,  
And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where, lo!—how fast  
she slept.

## 29

Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon  
Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set

255 A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon  
A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—  
O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!°  
The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,°  
The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet,  
260 Affray° his ears, though but in dying tone:—  
The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.

### 30

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,  
In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,  
While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
265 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;°  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
From Fez,° and spiced dainties, every one,  
270 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

### 31

These delicacies he heap'd with glowing hand  
On golden dishes and in baskets bright  
Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand  
In the retired quiet of the night,  
Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—  
275 "And now, my love, my seraph° fair, awake!  
Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite:°  
Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake,  
Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth  
ache."

### 32

Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved° arm

280 Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her dream  
By the dusk curtains:—'twas a midnight charm  
Impossible to melt as iced stream:  
The lustrous salvers<sup>o</sup> in the moonlight gleam;  
285 Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:  
It seem'd he never, never could redeem  
From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes;  
So mus'd awhile, entoil'd in woofed phantasies.<sup>8</sup>

### 33

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute,—  
Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,  
290 He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,  
In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":<sup>9</sup>  
Close to her ear touching the melody;—  
Wherewith disturb'd, she utter'd a soft moan:  
He ceased—she panted quick—and suddenly  
295 Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:  
Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured  
stone.

### 34

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,  
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:  
There was a painful change, that nigh<sup>o</sup> expell'd  
300 The blisses of her dream so pure and deep:  
At which fair Madeline began to weep,  
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;  
While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;  
Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,  
305 Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.

### 35

310 "Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now  
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,  
Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;  
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:  
How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!  
Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,  
Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!  
Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,  
315 For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go."

### 36

320 Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far  
At these voluptuous accents, he arose,  
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star  
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;  
Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
Blendeth its odour with the violet,—  
Solution<sup>o</sup> sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows  
Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet  
Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath  
set.

### 37

325 'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown<sup>o</sup> sleet:  
"This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!"  
'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:  
"No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!  
Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine.—  
Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?  
330 I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,  
Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;—  
A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing."

### 38

335 "My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!  
Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?  
Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil<sup>o</sup>  
dyed?  
Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest  
After so many hours of toil and quest,  
A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle.  
340 Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest  
Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well  
To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.

### 39

345 "Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land,  
Of haggard<sup>1</sup> seeming, but a boon indeed:  
Arise—arise! the morning is at hand;—  
The bloated wassaillers<sup>o</sup> will never heed:—  
Let us away, my love, with happy speed;  
There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see,—  
Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:<sup>2</sup>  
Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,  
350 For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee."

### 40

355 She hurried at his words, beset with fears,  
For there were sleeping dragons all around,  
At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—  
Down the wide stairs a darkling<sup>o</sup> way they found.  
—  
In all the house was heard no human sound.  
A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door;  
The arras,<sup>o</sup> rich with horseman, hawk, and hound,  
Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;  
360 And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

## 41

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;  
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;  
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,  
With a huge empty flaggon by his side:  
365 The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,  
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:<sup>3</sup>  
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—  
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—  
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

## 42

370 And they are gone: ay, ages long ago  
These lovers fled away into the storm.  
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,  
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form  
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,  
375 Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old  
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;  
The Beadsman, after thousand aves<sup>4</sup> told,  
For aye<sup>o</sup> unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

Jan.–Feb. 1819

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1: St. Agnes, martyred ca. 303 at the age of thirteen, is the patron saint of virgins. Legend has it that if a chaste young woman performs the proper ritual, she will dream of her future husband on the evening before St. Agnes's Day, January 21. Keats combines this superstition with the Romeo and Juliet theme of young love thwarted by feuding families and tells the story in a sequence of evolving Spenserian stanzas. The poem is Keats's first complete success in sustained narrative romance.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: One who is paid to pray for his benefactor. He “tells” (counts) the beads of his rosary to keep track of his prayers.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, when he thinks.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Silver-adorned revelers.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Skirts sweeping along the ground.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Covered by a hood or blindfolded.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Entirely oblivious or dead (“amort”) to everything except St. Agnes. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: On St. Agnes’s Day it was the custom to offer lambs’ wool at the altar, to be made into cloth by nuns.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Sheltered from the moonlight by the buttresses (the supports projecting from the wall).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Old (and, usually, homely) woman; an ironic development in English from the French meaning, “lovely lady.”[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In the old sense: godmother or old friend.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A sieve made to hold water by witchcraft.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, uses magic in her attempt to evoke the vision of her lover.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, whether good or ill befalls her.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Probably the episode in the Arthurian legends in which Merlin, the magician, lost his life when the wily Vivien turned one of his own spells against him.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: A drum-shaped embroidery frame.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, like an angel sent on a mission.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: An allusion to Ovid’s story, in the *Metamorphoses*, of Philomel, who was raped by Tereus, her sister’s husband. He cut out Philomel’s tongue to prevent her from speaking of his crime, but she managed to weave her story and make herself understood to her sister, Procne. Just as Tereus was about to kill



both women, Philomel and Procne were metamorphosed into a nightingale and a swallow.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: That is, among the genealogical emblems (“heraldries”) and other devices (“emblazonings”), a heraldic shield signified by its colors that the family was of royal blood.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The Pre-Raphaelite–inspired painter Daniel Maclise represented this moment in Keats’s romance in his painting of 1868, *Madeline after Prayer*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In a confused state between waking and sleeping.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Variouslly interpreted; perhaps: held tightly, cherished (or else kept shut, fastened with a clasp), like a Christian prayer book (“missal”) in a land where the religion is that of dark-skinned pagans (“swart Paynims”).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, jellies softer (“soother”) than the curds of cream, clear (“lucent”) syrups tinged with cinnamon, and sweet gums (“manna”) and dates transported in a great merchant ship (“argosy”) from Fez, in Morocco.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: One of the highest orders of angels.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Hermit, religious solitary.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Entangled in a weave of fantasies.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: “The Lovely Lady without Pity,” title of a work by the medieval poet Alain Chartier. Keats later adopted the title for his own ballad.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Wild, untamed (originally, a wild hawk).[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Rhine wine and the sleep-producing mead (a heavy fermented drink made with honey).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Acknowledges a member of the household.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The prayers beginning *Ave Maria* (“Hail Mary”).[Return to reference 4](#)

# Notes

- °: *lean*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *silent* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *chapels*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *Charmed*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *salvation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ostentation*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *stories*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tambourines*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *staff*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *soft*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tomb*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *much*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *restrain*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *confront*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *death knell*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *complaining*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *delicacies*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *arrive at*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *mightily*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *shivering*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frightened*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *window*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *red (heraldry)* [Return to reference](#) °
- °: *gift, blessing*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *halo*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *sleep-producing charm*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *high-pitched trumpet*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *frighten*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *melon*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *unmanned, weak*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *trays*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *nearly*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *fusion*[Return to reference](#) °

- °: *gust-blown*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *vermilion, bright red*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *drunken carousers*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *in the dark*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *tapestry*[Return to reference](#) °
- °: *ever*[Return to reference](#) °

# Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell<sup>1</sup>

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:  
No god, no demon of severe response,  
Deigns to reply from heaven or from hell.  
Then to my human heart I turn at once—  
Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;  
5 Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!  
O darkness! darkness! ever must I moan,  
To question heaven and hell and heart in vain!  
Why did I laugh? I know this being's lease—  
My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads:  
10 Yet could I on this very midnight cease,  
And the world's gaudy ensigns<sup>o</sup> see in shreds.  
Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,  
But death intenser—death is life's high meed.<sup>o</sup>

Mar. 1819

1848

## Endnotes

- Note 1: In the letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, into which he copied this sonnet, March 19, 1819, Keats wrote: "Though the first steps to it were through my human passions, they went away, and I wrote with my Mind—and perhaps I must confess a little bit of my heart. . . . I went to bed, and enjoyed an uninterrupted sleep. Sane I went to bed and sane I arose." [Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- °: *banners* [Return to reference °](#)

- $\circ$ : *reward* [Return to reference  \$\circ\$](#)

# Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art<sup>1</sup>

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—  
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,  
And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,<sup>2</sup>  
The moving waters at their priestlike task  
5 Of pure ablution<sup>3</sup> round earth's human shores,  
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque  
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;  
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,  
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
10 To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,  
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.<sup>4</sup>

1819

1838

## Endnotes

- Note 1: While on a tour of the Lake District in 1818, Keats had said that the austere scenes “refine one’s sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and steadfast over the wonders of the great Power.” The thought developed into this sonnet, which Keats drafted in 1819, then copied into his volume of Shakespeare’s poems at the end of September or the beginning of October 1820, while on his way to Italy, where he died.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Hermit, religious solitary.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Washing, as part of a religious rite.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: In the earlier version: "Half passionless, and so swoon on to death."[Return to reference 4](#)

# La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad<sup>1</sup>

## 1

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge<sup>o</sup> has wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

## 2

5 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
So haggard and so woe-begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full,  
And the harvest's done.

## 3

10 I see a lily on thy brow  
With anguish moist and fever dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
Fast withereth too.

## 4

15 I met a lady in the meads,  
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;  
Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild.

## 5



20 I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;<sup>2</sup>  
She look'd at me as she did love,  
And made sweet moan.

**6**

I set her on my pacing steed,  
And nothing else saw all day long,  
For sidelong would she bend, and sing  
A fairy's song.

**7**

25 She found me roots of relish<sup>o</sup> sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna dew,  
And sure in language strange she said—  
"I love thee true."

**8**

30 She took me to her elfin grot<sup>o</sup>  
And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four.<sup>3</sup>

**9**

35 And there she lulled me asleep,  
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!  
The latest<sup>o</sup> dream I ever dream'd  
On the cold hill's side.

**10**

40 I saw pale kings, and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
They cried—"La belle dame sans merci  
Hath thee in thrall!"

## 11

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam<sup>o</sup>  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke and found me here  
On the cold hill's side.

## 12

45 And this is why I sojourn here,  
Alone and palely loitering,  
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

Apr. 1819

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
The title, though not the subject, was taken from a medieval poem by Alain Chartier and means "The Lovely Lady without Pity." The story of a mortal destroyed by his love for a supernatural femme fatale has been told repeatedly in myth, fairy tale, and ballad. The text printed here is Keats's earlier version of the poem, as transcribed by Charles Brown. The version published in 1820 begins, "Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight."  
Keats imitates a frequent procedure of folk ballads by casting the poem into the dialogue form. The first three stanzas are addressed to the knight, and the rest of the poem is his reply.  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Belt (of flowers). [Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Keats commented in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, "Why four kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fain said 'score' without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgment. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play."[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *rushes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *flavor*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *cave*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *last*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *twilight*[Return to reference °](#)

# On Fame

Fame, like a wayward girl, will still be coy  
To those who woo her with too slavish knees,  
But makes surrender to some thoughtless boy,  
And dotes the more upon a heart at ease;  
5 She is a gipsey, will not speak to those  
Who have not learnt to be content without her;  
A jilt, whose ear was never whisper'd close,  
Who thinks they scandal her who talk about her;  
A very gipsey is she, Nilus born,<sup>1</sup>  
10 Sister-in-law to jealous Potiphar;<sup>2</sup>  
Ye love-sick bards, repay her scorn for scorn;  
Ye lovelorn artists, madmen that ye are!  
Make your best bow to her and bid adieu;  
Then, if she likes it, she will follow you.

Apr. 1819

1838

## Endnotes

- Note 1: That is, born near the Nile, in Egypt, where gypsies were thought to have originated. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In Genesis 39, the wife of Potiphar, an Egyptian soldier, does her best to seduce Joseph, the handsome slave her husband has bought. When she fails, she falsely accuses Joseph of rape, and Potiphar casts him into prison. [Return to reference 2](#)

# Sonnet to Sleep

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,  
Shutting with careful fingers and benign  
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,  
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:  
5 O soothest<sup>o</sup> Sleep! if so it please thee, close,  
In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes,  
Or wait the Amen ere thy poppy<sup>1</sup> throws  
Around my bed its lulling charities.  
Then save me or the passed day will shine  
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes:  
10 Save me from curious<sup>o</sup> conscience, that still hoards  
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like the mole;  
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,<sup>2</sup>  
And seal the hushed casket of my soul.

Apr. 1819

1838

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Opium is made from the dried juice of the opium poppy.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The ridges in a lock that correspond to the notches of the key.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *softest*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *scrupulous*[Return to reference °](#)

# Ode to Psyche<sup>1</sup>

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers,<sup>o</sup> wrung  
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,  
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung  
Even into thine own soft-conched<sup>2</sup> ear:  
Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see  
5 The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?  
I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,  
And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,  
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side  
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof  
10 Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran  
A brooklet, scarce espied:  
'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,  
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,<sup>3</sup>  
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;  
15 Their arms embraced, and their pinions<sup>o</sup> too;  
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,  
As if disjointed by soft-handed slumber,  
And ready still past kisses to outnumber  
At tender eye-dawn of aureorean love:<sup>4</sup>  
20 The winged boy I knew;  
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?  
His Psyche true!

O latest born and loveliest vision far  
Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!<sup>5</sup>  
25 Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,<sup>6</sup>  
Or Vesper,<sup>o</sup> amorous glow-worm of the sky;  
Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,  
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;

30 Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan  
Upon the midnight hours;  
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet  
From chain-swung censer teeming;  
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat  
35 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,<sup>7</sup>  
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,  
When holy were the haunted<sup>o</sup> forest boughs,  
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;  
Yet even in these days so far retir'd  
40 From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,<sup>o</sup>  
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,  
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.  
So let me be thy choir, and make a moan  
Upon the midnight hours;  
45 Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet  
From swung censer teeming;  
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat  
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

50 Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane<sup>o</sup>  
In some untrodden region of my mind,  
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant  
pain,  
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:  
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees  
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;<sup>8</sup>  
55 And there by zephyrs,<sup>o</sup> streams, and birds, and  
bees,  
The moss-lain Dryads<sup>o</sup> shall be lull'd to sleep;  
And in the midst of this wide quietness  
A rosy sanctuary will I dress  
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,  
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,

60       With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,  
          Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:  
          And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
          That shadowy thought can win,  
65       A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
          To let the warm Love<sup>9</sup> in!

Apr. 1819

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1:

This poem initiated the sequence of great odes that Keats wrote in the spring of 1819. It is copied into the same journal-letter that included the "Sonnet to Sleep" and "On the Sonnet," together with a comment about "endeavoring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have." It is therefore likely that Keats's experiments with sonnet schemes led to the development of the intricate and varied stanzas of his odes and that he abandoned the sonnet on discovering the richer possibilities of the more spacious form.

*Psyche*, which gives us our modern term *psychology*, means "mind" or "soul" (and also "butterfly") in Greek. In the story

[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Soft and shaped like a seashell.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The purple dye once made in ancient Tyre.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Aurora was the goddess of the dawn.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The ranks of the gods who lived on Mount Olympus, according to the classical mythology now eclipsed (made "faded") by Christianity. "You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour—and perhaps never thought of in the old religion—I am more orthodox tha[n] to let a hethen Goddess be



so neglected" (Keats, in a long letter written over several months to George and Georgiana Keats in America, April 30, 1819).[Return to reference 5](#)

- Note 6: The moon, supervised by the goddess Phoebe (Diana).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, of worshipers.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, the trees shall stand, rank against rank, like layers of feathers.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, Cupid, god of love.[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *verses*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wings*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *evening star*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *spirit-filled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *shining wings*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *temple*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *breezes*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wood nymphs*[Return to reference °](#)

## On the Sonnet<sup>1</sup>

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,  
And, like Andromeda,<sup>2</sup> the sonnet sweet  
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;  
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
5 To fit the naked foot of Poesy;  
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress  
Of every chord,<sup>3</sup> and see what may be gain'd  
By ear industrious, and attention meet;  
Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
10 Than Midas<sup>4</sup> of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay-wreath crown;  
So, if we may not let the Muse be free,  
She will be bound with garlands of her own.

Apr. 1819

1848

### Endnotes

- Note 1: In a letter including this sonnet, Keats wrote that "I have been endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have," objecting especially to the "pouncing rhymes" of the Petrarchan form and the inevitable tick of the closing couplet in the Shakespearean stanza. This poem displays some of Keats's experimentation with conventional sonnet patterns.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Andromeda was chained to a rock in order to placate a sea monster, but was rescued by Perseus.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Lyre-string.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: King Midas was granted his wish that all he touched should turn to gold.[Return to reference 4](#)

# Ode to a Nightingale<sup>1</sup>

## 1

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock<sup>2</sup> I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe<sup>3</sup>-wards had sunk:  
5 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness,—  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
10 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

## 2

O, for a draught of vintage!<sup>4</sup> that hath been  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of Flora<sup>4</sup> and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song,<sup>5</sup> and sunburnt mirth!  
O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
15 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,<sup>6</sup>  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth;  
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
20 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

## 3

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,

The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
25 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and  
dies;<sup>7</sup>  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.  
30

#### 4

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,<sup>8</sup>  
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:  
35 Already with thee! tender is the night,  
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;<sup>9</sup>  
But here there is no light,  
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
40 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy  
ways.

#### 5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
45 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;<sup>9</sup>  
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
And mid-May's eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,

50                   The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

**6**

Darkling<sup>o</sup> I listen; and, for many a time  
    I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused<sup>o</sup> rhyme,  
    To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
55       To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
    While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
    In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
    To thy high requiem<sup>o</sup> become a sod.  
60

**7**

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
    No hungry generations tread thee down;  
The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
    In ancient days by emperor and clown:<sup>o</sup>  
65   Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
    Through the sad heart of Ruth,<sup>1</sup> when, sick for  
    home,  
    She stood in tears amid the alien corn;<sup>o</sup>  
    The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements,<sup>o</sup> opening on the foam  
    Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.  
70

**8**

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
    To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy<sup>2</sup> cannot cheat so well  
    As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

75           Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem<sup>o</sup> fades  
              Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
              Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
              In the next valley-glades:  
              Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
              Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

80  
May 1819

1819

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Charles Brown, with whom Keats was then living in Hampstead, wrote: "In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass plot under a plum tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A poisonous herb, not the North American evergreen tree; a sedative if taken in small doses.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: River in Hades whose waters cause forgetfulness.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The Roman goddess of flowers or the flowers themselves.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Provence, in southern France, was in the late Middle Ages renowned for its troubadours—writers and singers of love songs.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Fountain of the muses on Mount Helicon, hence the waters of inspiration, here applied metaphorically to a beaker of wine.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Keats's brother Tom, wasted by tuberculosis, had died the preceding winter.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, by getting drunk not on wine (the "vintage" of stanza 2) but on the invisible ("viewless") wings of the poetic

imagination. (Bacchus, god of wine, was sometimes represented in a chariot drawn by “pards”—leopards.)[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Sweetbrier or honeysuckle.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The young widow in the biblical Book of Ruth.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, imagination, “the viewless wings of Poesy” of line 33.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *wine*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *fairies*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *green-foliaged*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *perfumed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *in darkness*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *meditated*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mass for the dead*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *peasant*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wheat*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *windows*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *hymn*[Return to reference °](#)

# Ode on a Grecian Urn<sup>1</sup>

## 1

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
Sylvan<sup>2</sup> historian, who canst thus express  
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
5 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?<sup>3</sup>  
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
10 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

## 2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear,<sup>4</sup> but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:  
15 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
20 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

## 3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;



And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
For ever piping songs for ever new;  
More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
25 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
For ever panting, and for ever young;  
All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
30 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

#### 4

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
35 What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
40 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

#### 5

O Attic<sup>5</sup> shape! Fair attitude!<sup>6</sup> with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,<sup>7</sup>  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
45 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"<sup>8</sup>—that is all  
50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
Another poem that Keats published in Haydon's *Annals of the Fine Arts*. This urn, with its sculptured reliefs of revelry and panting young lovers in chase and in flight, of a pastoral piper under spring foliage, and of the quiet procession of priest and townspeople, resembles parts of various vases, sculptures, and paintings, but it existed in all its particulars only in Keats's imagination. In the urn—which captures moments of intense experience in attitudes of grace and immobilizes them in marble—Keats found the perfect correlative for his concern with the longing for permanence in a world of change. The interpretation of the details with which he develops this  
[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Rustic, representing a woodland scene.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The valleys of Arcadia, a state in ancient Greece often used as a symbol of the pastoral ideal. Tempe is a beautiful valley in Greece that has come to represent rural beauty.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The ear of sense (as opposed to that of the "spirit," or imagination).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Greek. Attica was the region of Greece in which Athens was located.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Probably used in its early, technical sense: the pose struck by a figure in statuary or painting.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Ornamented all over ("overwrought") with an interwoven pattern ("brede"). The adjective "overwrought" might also modify "maidens" and even "men" and so hint at the emotional anguish of the figures portrayed on the urn.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8:  
The quotation marks around this phrase are found in the volume of poems Keats published in 1820, but there are no

quotation marks in the version printed in *Annals of the Fine Arts* that same year or in the transcripts of the poem made by Keats's friends. This discrepancy has multiplied the diversity of critical interpretations of the last two lines. Critics disagree whether the whole of these lines is said by the urn, or "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" by the urn and the rest by the lyric speaker; whether the "ye" in the last line is addressed to the lyric speaker, to the readers, to the urn, or to the figures on the urn; whether "all ye know" is that beauty is truth, or this plus

[Return to reference 8](#)

**Ode on Melancholy** This is Keats's best-known statement of his recurrent theme of the mingled contrarities of life. The remarkable last stanza, in which Melancholy becomes a veiled goddess worshiped in secret religious rites, implies that it is the tragic human destiny that beauty, joy, and life itself owe not only their quality but their value to the fact that they are transitory and turn into their opposites. Melancholy—a synonym for depression, involving a paralyzing self-consciousness engendered by an excess of thought—is a highly literary and even bookish ailment, as Keats knew. Shakespeare's Hamlet and Milton's speaker in "II Penseroso" are the disorder's most famous sufferers. Keats was also an admirer of Robert Burton's encyclopedic *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).

The ode once had the following first stanza, which Keats canceled in manuscript:

Though you should build a bark of dead men's  
bones,  
And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,  
Stitch creeds together for a sail, with groans  
To fill it out, bloodstained and aghast;  
Although your rudder be a Dragon's tail,  
Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,  
Your cordage large uprootings from the skull  
Of bald Medusa: certes you would fail  
To find the Melancholy, whether she  
Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull.

# Ode on Melancholy

## 1

No, no, go not to Lethe,<sup>1</sup> neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;<sup>2</sup>  
5 Make not your rosary of yew-berries,<sup>3</sup>  
Nor let the beetle,<sup>4</sup> nor the death-moth be  
Your mournful Psyche,<sup>5</sup> nor the downy owl  
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;<sup>o</sup>  
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
10 And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.<sup>6</sup>

## 2

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;  
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
15 Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;  
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
20 And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

## 3

She<sup>7</sup> dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips

Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
 Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:  
 Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
 25 Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,  
 Though seen of none save him whose  
 strenuous tongue  
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;<sup>8</sup>  
 His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
 And be among her cloudy trophies hung.<sup>9</sup>  
 30

1819

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The waters of forgetfulness in Hades. [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The wife of Pluto and queen of the underworld. "Nightshade" and "wolf's-bane" (line 2) are poisonous plants. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A symbol of death. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: A reference to replicas of the large black beetle, the scarab, which were often placed by Egyptians in their tombs as a symbol of resurrection. [Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In ancient times Psyche (the soul) was sometimes represented as a butterfly or moth, fluttering out of the mouth of a dying man. The allusion may also be to the death's-head moth, which has skull-like markings on its back. [Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, sorrow needs contrast to sustain its intensity. [Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Usually taken to refer to Melancholy rather than to "thy mistress" in line 18. [Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Sensitive, refined. [Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A reference to the Greek and Roman practice of hanging trophies in the temples of the gods. [Return to reference 9](#)

# Notes

- °: *secret rituals*[Return to reference °](#)

# Ode on Indolence<sup>1</sup>

"They toil not, neither do they spin."<sup>2</sup>

## 1

One morn before me were three figures seen,  
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;  
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,  
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:  
5 They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn,  
When shifted round to see the other side;  
They came again: as when the urn once more  
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;  
And they were strange to me, as may betide  
10 With vases, to one deep in Phidian<sup>3</sup> lore.

## 2

How is it, shadows, that I knew ye not?  
How came ye muffled in so hush a masque?  
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot  
To steal away, and leave without a task  
15 My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and  
less;  
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.  
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense  
20 Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

## 3



A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd  
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;  
Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd  
And ached for wings, because I knew the three:  
The first was a fair maid, and Love her name;  
25 The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,  
And ever watchful with fatigued eye;  
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame  
Is heap'd upon her, maiden most unmeek,—  
30 I knew to be my demon<sup>4</sup> Poesy.

#### 4

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:  
O folly! What is Love? and where is it?  
And for that poor Ambition—it springs  
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;  
35 For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,—  
At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,  
And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;  
O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,  
That I may never know how change the moons,  
40 Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

#### 5

A third time came they by;—alas! wherefore?  
My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;  
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er  
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled  
beams:  
45 The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,  
Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;  
The open casement<sup>o</sup> press'd a new-leaved vine,  
Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;<sup>o</sup>

O shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell!  
Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

## 6

So, ye three ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise  
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;  
For I would not be dieted with praise,  
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!<sup>5</sup>  
Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more  
In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn;  
Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,  
And for the day faint visions there is store;  
Vanish, ye phantoms, from my idle spright,<sup>o</sup>  
Into the clouds, and never more return!

<sup>60</sup>  
Spring 1819

1848

## Endnotes

- Note 1: On March 19, 1819, Keats wrote to George and Georgiana Keats: "This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless. . . . Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase—a Man and two women—whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement. This is the only happiness; and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind." The ode was probably written soon after this time, but was not published until 1848, long after the poet's death.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Matthew 6:28. Christ's comment on the lilies of the field—a parable justifying those who trust to God rather than worry about how they will feed or clothe themselves.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Phidias was the great Athenian sculptor of the 5th century B.C.E. who designed the marble sculptures for the

Parthenon.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Meaning both devil and, as in Greek myth, the spirit that attends constantly on the human individual.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: In a letter of June 9, 1819, Keats wrote: "I have been very idle lately, very averse to writing; both from the overpowering idea of our dead poets and from abatement of my love of fame. I hope I am a little more of a Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb. . . . You will judge of my 1819 temper when I tell you that the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence."[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *window*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *thrush's song*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *spirit*[Return to reference °](#)

**Lamia** In a note printed at the end of the poem, Keats cited as his source the following story in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621):

One Menippus Lycius, a young man twenty-five years of age, that going betwixt Cenchreas and Corinth, met such a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman, which, taking him by the hand, carried him home to her house, in the suburbs of Corinth. . . . The young man, a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions, though not this of love, tarried with her a while to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding, amongst other guests, came Apollonius; who, by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia; and that all her furniture was, like Tantalus's gold, described by Homer, no substance but mere illusions. When she saw herself descried, she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon she, plate, house, and all that was in it, vanished in an instant: many thousands took notice of this fact, for it was done in the midst of Greece.

In ancient demonology a lamia was a monster in woman's form who preyed on human beings. Several passages of Keats's romance seem, however, to call on readers to sympathize with this monster, as one might with Coleridge's Geraldine or Landon's Fairy of the Fountains. In the contest between Lamia and Apollonius it is hard to know what side to take.

The poem, written between late June and early September 1819, is a return, after the Spenserian stanzas of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, to the pentameter couplets Keats had used in *Endymion* and other early poems. Keats's friends Charles Armitage Brown and Richard

Woodhouse commented in letters on how *Lamia* was influenced by the characteristic meter of the Restoration poet John Dryden.

**Lamia**

## **Part 1**

Upon a time, before the faery broods  
Drove Nymph and Satyr<sup>1</sup> from the prosperous  
woods,  
Before King Oberon's bright diadem,  
Sceptre, and mantle, clasp'd with dewy gem,  
Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns  
5 From rushes green, and brakes,<sup>o</sup> and cowslip'd  
lawns,<sup>2</sup>  
The ever-smitten Hermes<sup>3</sup> empty left  
His golden throne, bent warm on amorous theft:  
From high Olympus had he stolen light,  
On this side of Jove's clouds, to escape the sight  
10 Of his great summoner, and made retreat  
Into a forest on the shores of Crete.  
For somewhere in that sacred island dwelt  
A nymph, to whom all hoofed Satyrs knelt;  
At whose white feet the languid Tritons<sup>4</sup> poured  
15 Pearls, while on land they wither'd and adored.  
Fast by the springs where she to bathe was wont,<sup>o</sup>  
And in those meads where sometime she might  
haunt,  
Were strewn rich gifts, unknown to any Muse,  
Though Fancy's casket were unlock'd to choose.  
20 Ah, what a world of love was at her feet!  
So Hermes thought, and a celestial heat  
Burnt from his winged heels to either ear,  
That from a whiteness, as the lily clear,  
Blush'd into roses 'mid his golden hair,  
25 Fallen in jealous curls about his shoulders bare.<sup>5</sup>

From vale to vale, from wood to wood, he flew,  
Breathing upon the flowers his passion new,

And wound with many a river to its head,  
To find where this sweet nymph prepar'd her secret  
30 bed:  
In vain; the sweet nymph might nowhere be found,  
And so he rested, on the lonely ground,  
Pensive, and full of painful jealousies  
Of the Wood-Gods, and even the very trees.  
There as he stood, he heard a mournful voice,  
35 Such as once heard, in gentle heart, destroys  
All pain but pity: thus the lone voice spake:  
"When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake!  
When move in a sweet body fit for life,  
And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife  
40 Of hearts and lips! Ah, miserable me!"  
The God, dove-footed,<sup>6</sup> glided silently  
Round bush and tree, soft-brushing, in his speed,  
The taller grasses and full-flowering weed,  
Until he found a palpitating snake,  
45 Bright, and cirque-couchant<sup>7</sup> in a dusky brake.

She was a gordian<sup>8</sup> shape of dazzling hue,  
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;  
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,<sup>9</sup>  
50 Eyed like a peacock,<sup>9</sup> and all crimson barr'd;  
And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,  
Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries—  
So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries,  
She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf,  
55 Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.  
Upon her crest she wore a wannish<sup>10</sup> fire  
Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne's tiar:<sup>1</sup>  
Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!  
She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls<sup>2</sup>  
60 complete:



And for her eyes: what could such eyes do there  
But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair?  
As Proserpine still weeps for her Sicilian air.<sup>3</sup>  
Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake  
Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love's sake,  
65 And thus; while Hermes on his pinions<sup>o</sup> lay,  
Like a stoop'd falcon<sup>4</sup> ere he takes his prey.

    "Fair Hermes, crown'd with feathers, fluttering  
    light,  
I had a splendid dream of thee last night:  
I saw thee sitting, on a throne of gold,  
70 Among the Gods, upon Olympus old,  
The only sad one; for thou didst not hear  
The soft, lute-finger'd Muses chaunting clear,  
Nor even Apollo when he sang alone,  
Deaf to his throbbing throat's long, long melodious  
75 moan.  
I dreamt I saw thee, robed in purple flakes,  
Break amorous through the clouds, as morning  
    breaks,  
And, swiftly as a bright Phœbean dart,<sup>5</sup>  
Strike for the Cretan isle; and here thou art!  
Too gentle Hermes, hast thou found the maid?"  
80 Whereat the star of Lethe<sup>6</sup> not delay'd  
His rosy eloquence, and thus inquired:  
"Thou smooth-lipp'd serpent, surely high inspired!  
Thou beauteous wreath, with melancholy eyes,  
Possess whatever bliss thou canst devise,  
85 Telling me only where my nymph is fled,—  
Where she doth breathe!" "Bright planet, thou hast  
    said,"  
Return'd the snake, "but seal with oaths, fair God!"  
"I swear," said Hermes, "by my serpent rod,  
And by thine eyes, and by thy starry crown!"

90       Light flew his earnest words, among the blossoms  
          blown.  
      Then thus again the brilliance feminine:  
      "Too frail of heart! for this lost nymph of thine,  
      Free as the air, invisibly, she strays  
95       About these thornless wilds; her pleasant days  
      She tastes unseen; unseen her nimble feet  
      Leave traces in the grass and flowers sweet;  
      From weary tendrils, and bow'd branches green,  
      She plucks the fruit unseen, she bathes unseen:  
100       And by my power is her beauty veil'd  
      To keep it unaffronted, unassail'd  
      By the love-glances of unlovely eyes,  
      Of Satyrs, Fauns, and blear'd Silenus<sup>7</sup> sighs.  
      Pale grew her immortality, for woe  
      Of all these lovers, and she grieved so  
105       I took compassion on her, bade her steep  
      Her hair in weird<sup>0</sup> syrops, that would keep  
      Her loveliness invisible, yet free  
      To wander as she loves, in liberty.  
      Thou shalt behold her, Hermes, thou alone,  
110       If thou wilt, as thou swearest, grant my boon!"  
      Then, once again, the charmed God began  
      An oath, and through the serpent's ears it ran  
      Warm, tremulous, devout, psalterian.<sup>8</sup>  
      Ravish'd, she lifted her Circean<sup>9</sup> head,  
115       Blush'd a live damask,<sup>1</sup> and swift-lisping said,  
      "I was a woman, let me have once more  
      A woman's shape, and charming as before.  
      I love a youth of Corinth—O the bliss!  
      Give me my woman's form, and place me where he  
120       is.  
      Stoop, Hermes, let me breathe upon thy brow,  
      And thou shalt see thy sweet nymph even now."  
      The God on half-shut feathers sank serene,

125 She breath'd upon his eyes, and swift was seen  
Of both the guarded nymph near-smiling on the  
green.  
It was no dream; or say a dream it was,  
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass  
Their pleasures in a long immortal dream.  
One warm, flush'd moment, hovering, it might seem  
130 Dash'd by the wood-nymph's beauty, so he burn'd;  
Then, lighting on the printless verdure, turn'd  
To the swoon'd serpent, and with languid arm,  
Delicate, put to proof the lythe Caducean charm.<sup>2</sup>  
So done, upon the nymph his eyes he bent  
Full of adoring tears and blandishment,  
135 And towards her stept: she, like a moon in wane,  
Faded before him, cower'd, nor could restrain  
Her fearful sobs, self-folding like a flower  
That faints into itself at evening hour:  
But the God fostering her chilled hand,  
140 She felt the warmth, her eyelids open'd bland,<sup>o</sup>  
And, like new flowers at morning song of bees,  
Bloom'd, and gave up her honey to the lees.<sup>o</sup>  
Into the green-recessed woods they flew;  
Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do.

145  
Left to herself, the serpent now began  
To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,  
Her mouth foam'd, and the grass, therewith  
besprent,<sup>o</sup>  
Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent;  
Her eyes in torture fix'd, and anguish drear,  
150 Hot, glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,  
Flash'd phosphor and sharp sparks, without one  
cooling tear.  
The colours all inflam'd throughout her train,  
She writh'd about, convuls'd with scarlet pain:  
A deep volcanian yellow took the place

155 Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;<sup>3</sup>  
And, as the lava ravishes the mead,  
Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;<sup>4</sup>  
Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,  
160 Eclips'd her crescents, and lick'd up her stars:  
So that, in moments few, she was undrest  
Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,  
And rubious-argent:<sup>o</sup> of all these bereft,  
Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.  
165 Still shone her crown; that vanish'd, also she  
Melted and disappear'd as suddenly;  
And in the air, her new voice luting soft,  
Cried, "Lycius! gentle Lycius!"—Borne aloft  
With the bright mists about the mountains hoar<sup>o</sup>  
170 These words dissolv'd: Crete's forests heard no  
more.

Whither fled Lamia, now a lady bright,  
A full-born beauty new and exquisite?  
She fled into that valley they pass o'er  
Who go to Corinth from Cenchreas' shore;<sup>5</sup>  
And rested at the foot of those wild hills,  
175 The rugged founts of the Peæran rills,  
And of that other ridge whose barren back  
Stretches, with all its mist and cloudy rack,  
South-westward to Cleone. There she stood  
About a young bird's flutter from a wood,  
180 Fair, on a sloping green of mossy tread,  
By a clear pool, wherein she passioned<sup>6</sup>  
To see herself escap'd from so sore ills,  
While her robes flaunted with the daffodils.

185 Ah, happy Lycius!—for she was a maid  
More beautiful than ever twisted braid,  
Or sigh'd, or blush'd, or on spring-flowered lea<sup>o</sup>

Spread a green kirtle<sup>o</sup> to the minstrelsy:  
A virgin purest lipp'd, yet in the lore  
Of love deep learned to the red heart's core:  
190 Not one hour old, yet of sciential brain  
To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain;  
Define their pettish limits, and estrange  
Their points of contact, and swift counterchange;<sup>7</sup>  
Intrigue with the specious chaos,<sup>8</sup> and dispart  
195 Its most ambiguous atoms with sure art;  
As though in Cupid's college she had spent  
Sweet days a lovely graduate, still unshent,<sup>o</sup>  
And kept his rosy terms<sup>9</sup> in idle languishment.

Why this fair creature chose so fairly  
200 By the wayside to linger, we shall see;  
But first 'tis fit to tell how she could muse  
And dream, when in the serpent prison-house,  
Of all she list,<sup>o</sup> strange or magnificent:  
How, ever, where she will'd, her spirit went;  
205 Whether to faint Elysium,<sup>1</sup> or where  
Down through tress-lifting waves the Nereids<sup>2</sup> fair  
Wind into Thetis' bower by many a pearly stair;  
Or where God Bacchus drains his cups divine,  
Stretch'd out, at ease, beneath a glutinous pine;  
210 Or where in Pluto's gardens palatine<sup>o</sup>  
Mulciber's columns gleam in far piazzian line.<sup>3</sup>  
And sometimes into cities she would send  
Her dream, with feast and rioting to blend;  
And once, while among mortals dreaming thus,  
215 She saw the young Corinthian Lycius  
Charioting foremost in the envious race,  
Like a young Jove with calm uneager face,  
And fell into a swooning love of him.  
Now on the moth-time of that evening dim  
220 He would return that way, as well she knew,

To Corinth from the shore; for freshly blew  
The eastern soft wind, and his galley now  
Grated the quaystones with her brazen prow  
In port Cenchreas, from Egina isle  
225 Fresh anchor'd; whither he had been awhile  
To sacrifice to Jove, whose temple there  
Waits with high marble doors for blood and incense  
rare.  
Jove heard his vows, and better'd his desire;  
For by some freakful chance he made retire  
230 From his companions, and set forth to walk,  
Perhaps grown wearied of their Corinth talk:  
Over the solitary hills he fared,  
Thoughtless at first, but ere eve's star appeared  
His phantasy was lost, where reason fades,  
235 In the calm'd twilight of Platonic shades.<sup>4</sup>  
Lamia beheld him coming, near, more near—  
Close to her passing, in indifference drear,  
His silent sandals swept the mossy green;  
So neighbour'd to him, and yet so unseen  
240 She stood: he pass'd, shut up in mysteries,  
His mind wrapp'd like his mantle, while her eyes  
Follow'd his steps, and her neck regal white  
Turn'd—syllabing thus, "Ah, Lycius bright,  
And will you leave me on the hills alone?  
245 Lycius, look back! and be some pity shown."  
He did; not with cold wonder fearingly,  
But Orpheus-like at an Eurydice;<sup>5</sup>  
For so delicious were the words she sung,  
It seem'd he had lov'd them a whole summer long:  
250 And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up,  
Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,  
And still the cup was full,—while he, afraid  
Lest she should vanish ere his lip had paid  
Due adoration, thus began to adore;

Her soft look growing coy, she saw his chain so sure:  
255 "Leave thee alone! Look back! Ah, Goddess, see  
Whether my eyes can ever turn from thee!  
For pity do not this sad heart belie<sup>o</sup>—  
Even as thou vanishest so I shall die.  
260 Stay! though a Naiad of the rivers, stay!  
To thy far wishes will thy streams obey:  
Stay! though the greenest woods be thy domain,  
Alone they can drink up the morning rain:  
Though a descended Pleiad,<sup>6</sup> will not one  
265 Of thine harmonious sisters keep in tune  
Thy spheres, and as thy silver proxy shine?  
So sweetly to these ravish'd ears of mine  
Came thy sweet greeting, that if thou shouldst fade  
Thy memory will waste me to a shade:—  
270 For pity do not melt!"—"If I should stay,"  
Said Lamia, "here, upon this floor of clay,  
And pain my steps upon these flowers too rough,  
What canst thou say or do of charm enough  
To dull the nice<sup>z</sup> remembrance of my home?  
275 Thou canst not ask me with thee here to roam  
Over these hills and vales, where no joy is,—  
Empty of immortality and bliss!  
Thou art a scholar, Lycius, and must know  
That finer spirits cannot breathe below  
280 In human climes, and live: Alas! poor youth,  
What taste of purer air hast thou to soothe  
My essence? What serener palaces,  
Where I may all my many senses please,  
And by mysterious sleights a hundred thirsts  
285 appease?  
It cannot be—Adieu!" So said, she rose  
Tiptoe with white arms spread. He, sick to lose  
The amorous promise of her lone complain,  
Swoon'd, murmuring of love, and pale with pain.

290 The cruel lady, without any show  
Of sorrow for her tender favourite's woe,  
But rather, if her eyes could brighter be,  
With brighter eyes and slow amenity,<sup>o</sup>  
Put her new lips to his, and gave afresh  
The life she had so tangled in her mesh:  
295 And as he from one trance was wakening  
Into another, she began to sing,  
Happy in beauty, life, and love, and every thing,  
A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres,  
While, like held breath, the stars drew in their  
300 panting fires.  
And then she whisper'd in such trembling tone,  
As those who, safe together met alone  
For the first time through many anguish'd days,  
Use other speech than looks; bidding him raise  
His drooping head, and clear his soul of doubt,  
305 For that she was a woman, and without  
Any more subtle fluid in her veins  
Than throbbing blood, and that the self-same pains  
Inhabited her frail-strung heart as his.  
And next she wonder'd how his eyes could miss  
310 Her face so long in Corinth, where, she said,  
She dwelt but half retir'd, and there had led  
Days happy as the gold coin could invent  
Without the aid of love; yet in content  
Till she saw him, as once she pass'd him by,  
315 Where 'gainst a column he leant thoughtfully  
At Venus' temple porch, 'mid baskets heap'd  
Of amorous herbs and flowers, newly reap'd  
Late on that eve, as 'twas the night before  
The Adonian feast;<sup>8</sup> whereof she saw no more,  
320 But wept alone those days, for why should she  
adore?  
Lycius from death awoke into amaze,



To see her still, and singing so sweet lays;  
Then from amaze into delight he fell  
To hear her whisper woman's lore so well;  
325 And every word she spake entic'd him on  
To unperplex'd delight<sup>9</sup> and pleasure known.  
Let the mad poets say whate'er they please  
Of the sweets of Fairies, Peris,<sup>1</sup> Goddesses,  
330 There is not such a treat among them all,  
Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,  
As a real woman, lineal indeed  
From Pyrrha's pebbles<sup>2</sup> or old Adam's seed.  
Thus gentle Lamia judg'd, and judg'd aright,  
That Lycius could not love in half a fright,  
335 So threw the goddess off, and won his heart  
More pleasantly by playing woman's part,  
With no more awe than what her beauty gave,  
That, while it smote, still guaranteed to save.  
Lycius to all made eloquent reply,  
340 Marrying to every word a twinborn sigh;  
And last, pointing to Corinth, ask'd her sweet,  
If 'twas too far that night for her soft feet.  
The way was short, for Lamia's eagerness  
Made, by a spell, the triple league decrease  
345 To a few paces; not at all surmised  
By blinded Lycius, so in her comprized.<sup>3</sup>  
They pass'd the city gates, he knew not how,  
So noiseless, and he never thought to know.

350 As men talk in a dream, so Corinth all,  
Throughout her palaces imperial,  
And all her populous streets and temples lewd,<sup>4</sup>  
Mutter'd, like tempest in the distance brew'd,  
To the wide-spreaded night above her towers.  
Men, women, rich and poor, in the cool hours,  
355 Shuffled their sandals o'er the pavement white,

Companion'd or alone; while many a light  
Flared, here and there, from wealthy festivals,  
And threw their moving shadows on the walls,  
Or found them cluster'd in the corniced shade  
360 Of some arch'd temple door, or dusky colonnade.

Muffling his face, of greeting friends in fear,  
Her fingers he press'd hard, as one came near  
With curl'd gray beard, sharp eyes, and smooth bald  
crown,  
365 Slow-stepp'd, and robed in philosophic gown:  
Lycius shrank closer, as they met and past,  
Into his mantle, adding wings to haste,  
While hurried Lamia trembled: "Ah," said he,  
"Why do you shudder, love, so ruefully?  
Why does your tender palm dissolve in dew?"—  
370 "I'm wearied," said fair Lamia: "tell me who  
Is that old man? I cannot bring to mind  
His features:—Lycius! wherefore did you blind  
Yourself from his quick eyes?" Lycius replied,  
" 'Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide  
375 And good instructor; but to-night he seems  
The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams."

While yet he spake they had arrived before  
A pillar'd porch, with lofty portal door,  
Where hung a silver lamp, whose phosphor glow  
380 Reflected in the slabbed steps below,  
Mild as a star in water; for so new,  
And so unsullied was the marble hue,  
So through the crystal polish, liquid fine,  
Ran the dark veins, that none but feet divine  
385 Could e'er have touch'd there. Sounds Æolian<sup>5</sup>  
Breath'd from the hinges, as the ample span  
Of the wide doors disclos'd a place unknown  
Some time to any, but those two alone,

390 And a few Persian mutes, who that same year  
 Were seen about the markets: none knew where  
 They could inhabit; the most curious  
 Were foil'd, who watch'd to trace them to their  
 house:  
 And but the flitter-winged verse must tell,  
 For truth's sake, what woe afterwards befel,  
 395 'Twould humour many a heart to leave them thus,  
 Shut from the busy world of more incredulous.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Nymphs and satyrs—like the dryads and fauns in line 5—were minor classical deities of the woods and fields, said here to have been driven off by Oberon, king of the fairies, who were supernatural beings of the postclassical era.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Cowslips are primroses, here blooming amid the grass.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Or Mercury; wing-footed messenger at the summons of Jove (line 11), Hermes was notoriously amorous.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Minor sea gods.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, the curls clung jealously to his bare shoulders. This line is the first of a number of Alexandrines, a six-foot line, used to vary the metrical movement—a device that Keats learned from Dryden. Another such device is the triplet, occurring first in lines 61–63.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, quietly as a dove.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Lying in a circular coil. Keats borrows the language of heraldry.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Intricately twisted, like the knot tied by King Gordius, which no one could undo.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Having multicolored spots, like the “eyes” in a peacock’s tail.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Ariadne's jeweled wedding crown, or tiara ("tiar"), was given to her by the god Bacchus, who took her as his wife after she was abandoned by her faithless mortal lover Theseus. The crown, transformed into a constellation of stars in the sky, is represented in Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, which Keats had seen when the painting was exhibited in London in 1816. Keats's memories of this painting may also inform his reference to Bacchus's chariot and leopards in "Ode to a Nightingale," line 32.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: "Pearls" had become almost a synonym for teeth in Elizabethan love poems.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Proserpine had been carried off to Hades by Pluto from the field of Enna, in Sicily.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: *Stoop* is the term for the plunge of a falcon on his prey.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: A ray of Phoebus Apollo, god of the sun.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Hermes, when he appeared like a star on the banks of Lethe, in the darkness of Hades. (One of Hermes' offices was to guide the souls of the dead to the lower regions.)[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Satyr, a tutor of Bacchus, usually represented as a fat, jolly drunkard.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Either "like a psalm" or "like the sound of the psaltery" (an ancient stringed instrument).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Like that of Circe, the enchantress in the *Odyssey*.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The color of a damask rose (large and fragrant pink rose). [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: That is, put to the test the magic of the flexible Caduceus (the name given to Hermes' wand).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, the yellow of sulfur (thrown up by a volcano) replaced her former silvery moon color.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Embroidery, interwoven pattern. "Mail": interlinked rings, as in a coat of armor.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Cenchrea (Keats's "Cenchreas") was a harbor of Corinth, in southern Greece.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Felt intense excitement.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: That is, of knowledgeable ("sciential") brain to disentangle ("unperplex") bliss from its closely related pain, to define their quarreled-over ("pettish") limits, and to separate out ("estrangle") their points of contact and the swift changes of each condition into its opposite. See Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," lines 21–26 (p. 974, above).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That is, turn to her own artful purpose the seeming ("specious") chaos.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The terms spent studying in "Cupid's college."[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Region inhabited by the virtuous after death.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Sea nymphs, of whom Thetis (line 208, the mother of Achilles) was one.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, columns made by Mulciber (Vulcan, god of fire and metalworking) gleam in long lines around open courts (piazzas).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, he was absorbed in musing about the obscurities of Plato's philosophy.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: As Orpheus looked at Eurydice in Hades. Orpheus was allowed by Pluto to lead Eurydice back to Earth on condition that he not look back at her, but he could not resist doing so and hence lost her once more.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: One of the seven sisters composing the constellation Pleiades. The lines that follow allude to the ancient belief that the planets traveled inside crystalline spheres whose movements produced heavenly music.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Detailed, minutely accurate.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The feast of Adonis, beloved by Venus.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, delight not mixed with its neighbor, pain (see line 192).[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: Fairylike creatures in Persian mythology.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Descended from the pebbles with which, in Greek myth, Pyrrha and Deucalion repopled the earth after the flood.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Bound up, absorbed.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Temples of Venus, whose worship sometimes involved ritual prostitution. The city of Corinth was notorious in antiquity as a site of commerce and prostitution.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Like sounds from the wind harp (Aeolus is god of winds), which responds musically to a current of air.[Return to reference 5](#)

## Notes

- °: *thickets*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *accustomed*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *leopard*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *rather dark*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wings*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *magical*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *softly*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *dregs*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *sprinkled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *silvery red*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *white*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *meadow*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *gown*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *unspoiled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *wished*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *palatial*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *betray*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pleasure*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***Part 2***

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,  
Is—Love, forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust;  
Love in a palace is perhaps at last  
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast:—  
That is a doubtful tale from faery land,  
5 Hard for the non-elect to understand.  
Had Lycius liv'd to hand his story down,  
He might have given the moral a fresh frown,  
Or clench'd it quite: but too short was their bliss  
To breed distrust and hate, that make the soft voice  
10 hiss.  
Besides, there, nightly, with terrific glare,  
Love, jealous grown of so complete a pair,  
Hover'd and buzz'd his wings, with fearful roar,  
Above the lintel of their chamber door,  
And down the passage cast a glow upon the floor.  
15  
For all this came a ruin: side by side  
They were enthroned, in the even tide,  
Upon a couch, near to a curtaining  
Whose airy texture, from a golden string,  
Floated into the room, and let appear  
20 Unveil'd the summer heaven, blue and clear,  
Betwixt two marble shafts:—there they reposed,  
Where use had made it sweet, with eyelids closed,  
Saving a tythe which love still open kept,  
That they might see each other while they almost  
25 slept;  
When from the slope side of a suburb hill,  
Deafening the swallow's twitter, came a thrill  
Of trumpets—Lycius started—the sounds fled,  
But left a thought, a buzzing in his head.  
For the first time, since first he harbour'd in

30 That purple-lined palace of sweet sin,  
His spirit pass'd beyond its golden bourn<sup>o</sup>  
Into the noisy world almost forsworn.  
The lady, ever watchful, penetrant,  
35 Saw this with pain, so arguing a want  
Of something more, more than her empery<sup>o</sup>  
Of joys; and she began to moan and sigh  
Because he mused beyond her, knowing well  
That but a moment's thought is passion's passing  
bell.<sup>o</sup>  
40 "Why do you sigh, fair creature?" whisper'd he:  
"Why do you think?" return'd she tenderly:  
"You have deserted me;—where am I now?  
Not in your heart while care weighs on your brow:  
No, no, you have dismiss'd me; and I go  
45 From your breast houseless: ay, it must be so."  
He answer'd, bending to her open eyes,  
Where he was mirror'd small in paradise,  
"My silver planet, both of eve and morn!<sup>6</sup>  
Why will you plead yourself so sad forlorn,  
50 While I am striving how to fill my heart  
With deeper crimson, and a double smart?  
How to entangle, trammel up and snare  
Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there  
Like the hid scent in an unbudded rose?  
55 Ay, a sweet kiss—you see your mighty woes.<sup>7</sup>  
My thoughts! shall I unveil them? Listen then!  
What mortal hath a prize, that other men  
May be confounded and abash'd withal,  
But lets it sometimes pace abroad majestic,  
And triumph, as in thee I should rejoice  
60 Amid the hoarse alarm of Corinth's voice.  
Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,  
While through the thronged streets your bridal car<sup>o</sup>  
Wheels round its dazzling spokes."—The lady's cheek



65 Trembled; she nothing said, but, pale and meek,  
Arose and knelt before him, wept a rain  
Of sorrows at his words; at last with pain  
Beseeching him, the while his hand she wrung,  
To change his purpose. He thereat was stung,  
70 Perverse, with stronger fancy to reclaim  
Her wild and timid nature to his aim:  
Besides, for all his love, in self despite,  
Against his better self, he took delight  
Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.  
His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue  
75 Fierce and sanguineous as 'twas possible  
In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.  
Fine was the mitigated fury, like  
Apollo's presence when in act to strike  
The serpent—Ha, the serpent! certes, she  
80 Was none. She burnt, she lov'd the tyranny,  
And, all subdued, consented to the hour  
When to the bridal he should lead his paramour.  
Whispering in midnight silence, said the youth,  
"Sure some sweet name thou hast, though, by my  
85 truth,  
I have not ask'd it, ever thinking thee  
Not mortal, but of heavenly progeny,  
As still I do. Hast any mortal name,  
Fit appellation for this dazzling frame?  
Or friends or kinsfolk on the citied earth,  
90 To share our marriage feast and nuptial mirth?"  
"I have no friends," said Lamia, "no, not one;  
My presence in wide Corinth hardly known:  
My parents' bones are in their dusty urns  
Sepulchred, where no kindled incense burns,  
95 Seeing all their luckless race are dead, save me,  
And I neglect the holy rite for thee.  
Even as you list<sup>o</sup> invite your many guests;  
But if, as now it seems, your vision rests

100 With any pleasure on me, do not bid  
Old Apollonius—from him keep me hid.”  
Lycius, perplex’d at words so blind and blank,  
Made close inquiry; from whose touch she shrank,  
Feigning a sleep; and he to the dull shade  
Of deep sleep in a moment was betray’d.

105

It was the custom then to bring away,  
The bride from home at blushing shut of day,  
Veil’d, in a chariot, heralded along  
By strewn flowers, torches, and a marriage song,  
With other pageants: but this fair unknown  
110 Had not a friend. So being left alone,  
(Lycius was gone to summon all his kin)  
And knowing surely she could never win  
His foolish heart from its mad pompousness,  
She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress  
115 The misery in fit magnificence.  
She did so, but ’tis doubtful how and whence  
Came, and who were her subtle servitors.  
About the halls, and to and from the doors,  
There was a noise of wings, till in short space  
120 The glowing banquet-room shone with wide-arched  
grace.

A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone  
Supportress of the faery-roof, made moan  
Throughout, as fearful the whole charm might fade.  
Fresh carved cedar, mimicking a glade  
125 Of palm and plantain, met from either side,  
High in the midst, in honour of the bride:  
Two palms and then two plantains, and so on,  
From either side their stems branch’d one to one  
All down the aisled place; and beneath all  
130 There ran a stream of lamps straight on from wall to  
wall.

So canopied, lay an untasted feast

Teeming with odours. Lamia, regal drest,  
Silently paced about, and as she went,  
In pale contented sort of discontent,  
135 Mission'd her viewless<sup>o</sup> servants to enrich  
The fretted<sup>8</sup> splendour of each nook and niche.  
Between the tree-stems, marbled plain at first,  
Came jasper pannels; then, anon, there burst  
Forth creeping imagery of slighter trees,  
140 And with the larger wove in small intricacies.  
Approving all, she faded at self-will,  
And shut the chamber up, close, hush'd and still,  
Complete and ready for the revels rude,  
When dreadful<sup>o</sup> guests would come to spoil her  
145 solitude.

The day appeared, and all the gossip rout.  
O senseless Lycius! Madman! wherefore flout  
The silent-blessing fate, warm cloister'd hours,  
And show to common eyes these secret bowers?  
The herd approach'd; each guest, with busy brain,  
150 Arriving at the portal, gaz'd amain,<sup>o</sup>  
And enter'd marveling: for they knew the street,  
Remember'd it from childhood all complete  
Without a gap, yet ne'er before had seen  
That royal porch, that high-built fair demesne;<sup>o</sup>  
155 So in they hurried all, maz'd, curious and keen:  
Save one, who look'd thereon with eye severe,  
And with calm-planted steps walk'd in austere;  
'Twas Apollonius: something too he laugh'd,  
As though some knotty problem, that had daft<sup>o</sup>  
160 His patient thought, had now begun to thaw,  
And solve and melt:—'twas just as he foresaw.

He met within the murmurous vestibule  
His young disciple. " 'Tis no common rule,  
Lycius," said he, "for uninvited guest

165 To force himself upon you, and infest  
With an unbidden presence the bright throng  
Of younger friends; yet must I do this wrong,  
And you forgive me." Lycius blush'd, and led  
170 The old man through the inner doors broad-spread;  
With reconciling words and courteous mien<sup>o</sup>  
Turning into sweet milk the sophist's<sup>o</sup> spleen.

Of wealthy lustre was the banquet-room,  
Fill'd with pervading brilliance and perfume:  
Before each lucid pannel fuming stood  
175 A censer fed with myrrh and spiced wood,  
Each by a sacred tripod held aloft,  
Whose slender feet wide-swerv'd upon the soft  
Wool-woofed<sup>o</sup> carpets: fifty wreaths of smoke  
From fifty censers their light voyage took  
180 To the high roof, still mimick'd as they rose  
Along the mirror'd walls by twin-clouds odorous.  
Twelve sphered tables, by silk seats insphered,  
High as the level of a man's breast rear'd  
On libbard's<sup>o</sup> paws, upheld the heavy gold  
185 Of cups and goblets, and the store thrice told  
Of Ceres' horn,<sup>9</sup> and, in huge vessels, wine  
Come from the gloomy tun with merry shine.  
Thus loaded with a feast the tables stood,  
Each shrining in the midst the image of a God.

190 When in an antichamber every guest  
Had felt the cold full sponge to pleasure press'd,  
By minist'ring slaves, upon his hands and feet,  
And fragrant oils with ceremony meet<sup>o</sup>  
Pour'd on his hair, they all mov'd to the feast  
195 In white robes, and themselves in order placed  
Around the silken couches, wondering  
Whence all this mighty cost and blaze of wealth  
could spring.

Soft went the music the soft air along,  
While fluent Greek a vowel'd undersong  
200 Kept up among the guests, discoursing low  
At first, for scarcely was the wine at flow;  
But when the happy vintage touch'd their brains,  
Louder they talk, and louder come the strains  
Of powerful instruments:—the gorgeous dyes,  
205 The space, the splendour of the draperies,  
The roof of awful richness, nectarous cheer,  
Beautiful slaves, and Lamia's self, appear,  
Now, when the wine has done its rosy deed,  
And every soul from human trammels freed,  
210 No more so strange; for merry wine, sweet wine,  
Will make Elysian shades not too fair, too divine.

Soon was God Bacchus at meridian height;  
Flush'd were their cheeks, and bright eyes double  
bright:  
Garlands of every green, and every scent  
215 From vales deflower'd, or forest-trees branch-rent,  
In baskets of bright osier'd<sup>1</sup> gold were brought  
High as the handles heap'd, to suit the thought  
Of every guest; that each, as he did please,  
Might fancy-fit his brows, silk-pillow'd at his ease.  
220

What wreath for Lamia? What for Lycius?  
What for the sage, old Apollonius?  
Upon her aching forehead be there hung  
The leaves of willow and of adder's tongue;<sup>2</sup>  
And for the youth, quick, let us strip for him  
225 The thyrsus,<sup>3</sup> that his watching eyes may swim  
Into forgetfulness; and, for the sage,  
Let spear-grass and the spiteful thistle wage  
War on his temples. Do not all charms fly  
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?<sup>4</sup>

230 There was an awful<sup>o</sup> rainbow once in heaven:  
We know her woof, her texture; she is given  
In the dull catalogue of common things.  
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,  
235 Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine<sup>5</sup>—  
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made  
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.

By her glad Lycius sitting, in chief place,  
240 Scarce saw in all the room another face,  
Till, checking his love trance, a cup he took  
Full brimm'd, and opposite sent forth a look  
'Cross the broad table, to beseech a glance  
From his old teacher's wrinkled countenance,  
And pledge<sup>o</sup> him. The bald-head philosopher  
245 Had fix'd his eye, without a twinkle or stir  
Full on the alarmed beauty of the bride,  
Brow-beating her fair form, and troubling her sweet  
pride.

Lycius then press'd her hand, with devout touch,  
As pale it lay upon the rosy couch:  
250 'Twas icy, and the cold ran through his veins;  
Then sudden it grew hot, and all the pains  
Of an unnatural heat shot to his heart.  
"Lamia, what means this? Wherefore dost thou  
start?

Know'st thou that man?" Poor Lamia answer'd not.  
255 He gaz'd into her eyes, and not a jot  
Own'd<sup>o</sup> they the lovelorn piteous appeal:  
More, more he gaz'd: his human senses reel:  
Some hungry spell that loveliness absorbs;  
There was no recognition in those orbs.  
260 "Lamia!" he cried—and no soft-toned reply.  
The many heard, and the loud revelry  
Grew hush; the stately music no more breathes;

The myrtle<sup>6</sup> sicken'd in a thousand wreaths.  
By faint degrees, voice, lute, and pleasure ceased;  
265 A deadly silence step by step increased,  
Until it seem'd a horrid presence there,  
And not a man but felt the terror in his hair.  
"Lamia!" he shriek'd; and nothing but the shriek  
With its sad echo did the silence break.  
270 "Begone, foul dream!" he cried, gazing again  
In the bride's face, where now no azure vein  
Wander'd on fair-spaced temples; no soft bloom  
Misted the cheek; no passion to illumine  
The deep-recessed vision:—all was blight;  
275 Lamia, no longer fair, there sat a deadly white.  
"Shut, shut those juggling<sup>7</sup> eyes, thou ruthless man!  
Turn them aside, wretch! or the righteous ban  
Of all the Gods, whose dreadful images  
Here represent their shadowy presences,  
280 May pierce them on the sudden with the thorn  
Of painful blindness; leaving thee forlorn,  
In trembling dotage to the feeblest fright  
Of conscience, for their long offended might,  
For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries,  
285 Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.  
Corinthians! look upon that gray-beard wretch!  
Mark how, possess'd, his lashless eyelids stretch  
Around his demon eyes! Corinthians, see!  
My sweet bride withers at their potency."  
290 "Fool!" said the sophist, in an under-tone  
Gruff with contempt; which a death-nighing moan  
From Lycius answer'd, as heart-struck and lost,  
He sank supine beside the aching ghost.  
"Fool! Fool!" repeated he, while his eyes still  
295 Relented not, nor mov'd; "from every ill  
Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,  
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?"

300 Then Lamia breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,  
 Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,  
 Keen, cruel, perçant,<sup>o</sup> stinging: she, as well  
 As her weak hand could any meaning tell,  
 Motion'd him to be silent; vainly so,  
 He look'd and look'd again a level—No!  
 305 "A Serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said,  
 Than with a frightful scream she vanished:  
 And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,  
 As were his limbs of life, from that same night.  
 On the high couch he lay!—his friends came round—  
 Supported him—no pulse, or breath they found,  
 310 And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.

July–Aug. 1819

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 6: The planet Venus, which is both the morning and the evening star.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Playfully: "You see how great your troubles were!"[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Adorned with fretwork (interlaced patterns).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The horn of plenty, overflowing with the products of Ceres, goddess of grain.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Plaited. An "osier" is a strip of willow used in weaving baskets.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: A fern whose spikes resemble a serpent's tongue.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The vine-covered staff of Bacchus, used to signify drunkenness.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In the sense of "natural philosophy," or science. Benjamin Haydon tells in his *Autobiography* how, at a hard-drinking and high-spirited dinner party, Keats had agreed with Charles Lamb (to what extent jokingly, it is not clear) that



Newton's *Optics* "had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colors."[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: Gnomes were guardians of mines.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Sacred to Venus, hence an emblem of love.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Deceiving, full of trickery.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *boundary*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *empire*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *death knell*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *chariot*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *choose*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *invisible*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *terrifying*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *intently*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *estate*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *baffled*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *appearance*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *scholar's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *woven*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *leopard's*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *suitable*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *awe-inspiring*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *drink a toast to* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *acknowledged*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *piercing*[Return to reference °](#)

# To Autumn<sup>1</sup>

## 1

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves  
run;  
5 To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
10 Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy  
cells.

## 2

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
15 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing<sup>2</sup> wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook<sup>o</sup>  
Spares the next swath and all its twined  
flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
20 Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozy hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?  
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
 While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
 25 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
 Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
 Among the river shallows,<sup>o</sup> borne aloft  
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
 30 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;<sup>o</sup>  
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
 The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;<sup>3</sup>  
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Sept. 19, 1819

1820

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Two days after this ode was composed, Keats wrote to J. H. Reynolds: "I never liked stubble fields so much as now—Aye, better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm—in the same way that some pictures look warm—this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: To "winnow" is to fan the chaff from the grain.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: An enclosed plot of farmland.[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *scythe*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *willows*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *region*[Return to reference °](#)

**The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream** Late in 1818, while he was serving as nurse to his dying brother Tom, Keats planned to undertake an epic poem, modeled on *Paradise Lost*, that he called *Hyperion*. Greek mythology gave Keats its subject—the displacement of Saturn and his fellow Titans by a new generation of gods, Zeus and the other Olympians. But in engaging this topic Keats addressed the epic question at the center of *Paradise Lost*: how did evil come into the world and why? The Titans had been fair and benign gods, and their rule had been a golden age of happiness. Yet at the beginning of the poem all the Titans except Hyperion, god of the sun, have been dethroned; and the uncomprehending Saturn again and again raises the question of how this injustice could have come to be.

In book 3 of the original *Hyperion*, the scenes among the Titans are supplemented by the experience of the Olympian Apollo, still a youth but destined to displace Hyperion as the sun god among the heavenly powers. He lives in “aching ignorance” of the universe and its processes but thirsts for knowledge. Suddenly Apollo reads in the face of his tutor Mnemosyne—goddess of memory, who will be mother of the Muses and so of all the arts—the silent record of the defeat of the Titans and at once soars to the knowledge that he seeks. Apollo cries out:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.  
Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,  
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,  
Creations and destroyings, all at once  
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,  
And deify me. . . .

This opening out of Apollo’s awareness to the tragic nature of life is what the Titans lacked. As the fragment breaks off, Apollo is transfigured—not only into one who has earned the right to displace Hyperion as god of the sun, but also into the god of the highest poetry.

Keats abandoned this extraordinary fragment in April 1819. Late that summer, however, he took up the theme again, under the title *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. This time his primary model is Dante. In Dante's *Divine Comedy* all the narrated events are represented as a vision granted to the poet. In the same way, Keats begins *The Fall of Hyperion* with a frame story whose central event is that the poet-protagonist, in a dream, falls from a paradisaal landscape into a wasteland and there earns the right to a vision. That vision reincorporates the events narrated in the first *Hyperion*: Moneta (her Latin name suggests "the Admonisher"), who stands in the same relationship to the poet as, in the earlier tale, Mnemosyne stood to Apollo, permits, or challenges, this protagonist to remember, with her, her own memories of the fall of the Titans. By devising this frame story, Keats shifted his center of poetic concern from the narration of epic action to an account of the evolving consciousness of the epic poet.

Keats abandoned this attempt at *The Fall of Hyperion* at the sixty-first line of the second canto. (A fragment was published, against his wishes, in his 1820 volume of poems.) He wrote to Reynolds on September 21, 1819:

I have given up Hyperion. . . . Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations.

In the same letter Keats mentions having composed two days earlier the ode "To Autumn." In this, the poet had envisaged the circumstance of the cycle of life and death, and had articulated his experience in his own poetic voice.

# The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream

## *Canto 1*

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave  
A paradise for a sect; the savage too  
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep  
Guesses at heaven: pity these have not  
Trac'd upon vellum<sup>o</sup> or wild Indian leaf  
5 The shadows of melodious utterance.  
But bare of laurel<sup>1</sup> they live, dream, and die;  
For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
With the fine spell of words alone can save  
Imagination from the sable charm  
10 And dumb<sup>o</sup> enchantment. Who alive can say  
"Thou art no poet; mayst not tell thy dreams"?  
Since every man whose soul is not a clod  
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had lov'd  
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.  
15 Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse  
Be poet's or fanatic's will be known  
When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.

Methought I stood where trees of every clime,  
Palm, myrtle, oak, and sycamore, and beech,  
20 With plantane, and spice blossoms, made a screen;  
In neighbourhood of fountains, by the noise  
Soft showering in mine ears, and, by the touch  
Of scent, not far from roses. Turning round,  
I saw an arbour with a drooping roof  
25 Of trellis vines, and bells, and larger blooms,  
Like floral-censers swinging light in air;  
Before its wreathed doorway, on a mound

Of moss, was spread a feast of summer fruits,  
Which, nearer seen, seem'd refuse of a meal  
30 By angel tasted, or our mother Eve;<sup>2</sup>  
For empty shells were scattered on the grass,  
And grape stalks but half bare, and remnants more,  
Sweet smelling, whose pure kinds I could not know.  
Still was more plenty than the fabled horn<sup>3</sup>  
35 Thrice emptied could pour forth, at banqueting  
For Proserpine return'd to her own fields,<sup>4</sup>  
Where the white heifers low. And appetite  
More yearning than on earth I ever felt  
Growing within, I ate deliciously;  
40 And, after not long, thirsted, for thereby  
Stood a cool vessel of transparent juice,  
Sipp'd by the wander'd bee, the which I took,  
And, pledging all the mortals of the world,  
And all the dead whose names are in our lips,  
45 Drank. That full draught is parent of my theme.<sup>5</sup>  
No Asian poppy,<sup>o</sup> nor elixir fine  
Of the soon fading jealous caliphat;<sup>6</sup>  
No poison gender'd in close monkish cell  
To thin the scarlet conclave of old men,<sup>7</sup>  
50 Could so have rapt unwilling life away.  
Among the fragrant husks and berries crush'd,  
Upon the grass I struggled hard against  
The domineering potion; but in vain:  
The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sunk  
55 Like a Silenus<sup>8</sup> on an antique vase.  
How long I slumber'd 'tis a chance to guess.  
When sense of life return'd, I started up  
As if with wings; but the fair trees were gone,  
The mossy mound and arbour were no more;  
60 I look'd around upon the carved sides  
Of an old sanctuary with roof august,  
Builded so high, it seem'd that filmed clouds

Might spread beneath, as o'er the stars of heaven;  
So old the place was, I remembered none  
65 The like upon the earth; what I had seen  
Of grey cathedrals, buttress'd walls, rent towers,  
The superannuations<sup>o</sup> of sunk realms,  
Or nature's rocks toil'd hard in waves and winds,  
Seem'd but the faulture<sup>o</sup> of decrepit things  
70 To<sup>o</sup> that eternal domed monument.  
Upon the marble at my feet there lay  
Store of strange vessels, and large draperies,  
Which needs had been of dyed asbestus wove,  
Or in that place the moth could not corrupt,<sup>9</sup>  
75 So white the linen; so, in some, distinct  
Ran imageries from a sombre loom.  
All in a mingled heap confus'd there lay  
Robes, golden tongs, censer, and chafing dish,  
Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelries.<sup>1</sup>  
80

Turning from these with awe, once more I rais'd  
My eyes to fathom the space every way;  
The embossed roof, the silent massy range  
Of columns north and south, ending in mist  
85 Of nothing, then to eastward, where black gates  
Were shut against the sunrise evermore.  
Then to the west I look'd, and saw far off  
An image, huge of feature as a cloud,  
At level of whose feet an altar slept,  
To be approach'd on either side by steps,  
90 And marble balustrade,<sup>o</sup> and patient travail  
To count with toil the innumerable degrees.  
Towards the altar sober-pac'd I went,  
Repressing haste, as too unholy there;  
And, coming nearer, saw beside the shrine  
95 One minist'ring;<sup>2</sup> and there arose a flame.  
When in mid-May the sickening east wind



Shifts sudden to the south, the small warm rain  
Melts out the frozen incense from all flowers,  
And fills the air with so much pleasant health  
100 That even the dying man forgets his shroud;  
Even so that lofty sacrificial fire,  
Sending forth Maian<sup>3</sup> incense, spread around  
Forgetfulness of every thing but bliss,  
And clouded all the altar with soft smoke,  
105 From whose white fragrant curtains thus I heard  
Language pronounc'd. "If thou canst not ascend  
These steps,<sup>4</sup> die on that marble where thou art.  
Thy flesh, near cousin to the common dust,  
Will parch for lack of nutriment—thy bones  
110 Will wither in few years, and vanish so  
That not the quickest eye could find a grain  
Of what thou now art on that pavement cold.  
The sands of thy short life are spent this hour,  
And no hand in the universe can turn  
115 Thy hour glass, if these gummed<sup>o</sup> leaves be burnt  
Ere thou canst mount up these immortal steps."  
I heard, I look'd: two senses both at once  
So fine, so subtle, felt the tyranny  
Of that fierce threat, and the hard task proposed.  
120 Prodigious seem'd the toil; the leaves were yet  
Burning,—when suddenly a palsied chill  
Struck from the paved level up my limbs,  
And was ascending quick to put cold grasp  
Upon those streams<sup>o</sup> that pulse beside the throat:  
125 I shriek'd; and the sharp anguish of my shriek  
Stung my own ears—I strove hard to escape  
The numbness; strove to gain the lowest step.  
Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold  
Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart;  
130 And when I clasp'd my hands I felt them not.  
One minute before death, my iced foot touch'd

The lowest stair; and as it touch'd, life seem'd  
To pour in at the toes: I mounted up,  
As once fair angels on a ladder flew  
135 From the green turf to heaven.<sup>5</sup>—"Holy Power,"  
Cried I, approaching near the horned shrine,<sup>6</sup>  
"What am I that should so be sav'd from death?  
What am I that another death come not  
To choke my utterance sacrilegious here?"  
140 Then said the veiled shadow—"Thou hast felt  
What 'tis to die and live again before  
Thy fated hour. That thou hadst power to do so  
Is thy own safety; thou hast dated on  
Thy doom."<sup>7</sup>—"High Prophetess," said I, "purge off  
145 Benign, if so it please thee, my mind's film."<sup>8</sup>  
"None can usurp this height," return'd that shade,  
"But those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.  
All else who find a haven in the world,  
150 Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,  
If by a chance into this fane<sup>9</sup> they come,  
Rot on the pavement where thou rotted'st half."<sup>9</sup>—  
"Are there not thousands in the world," said I,  
Encourag'd by the sooth<sup>1</sup> voice of the shade,  
155 "Who love their fellows even to the death;  
Who feel the giant agony of the world;  
And more, like slaves to poor humanity,  
Labour for mortal good? I sure should see  
Other men here: but I am here alone."  
160 "They whom thou spak'st of are no vision'ries,"  
Rejoin'd that voice—"They are no dreamers weak,  
They seek no wonder but the human face;  
No music but a happy-noted voice—  
They come not here, they have no thought to come  
165 —  
And thou art here, for thou art less than they.

What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,  
To the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing;  
A fever of thyself—think of the earth;  
What bliss even in hope is there<sup>o</sup> for thee?  
170 What haven? Every creature hath its home;  
Every sole man hath days of joy and pain,  
Whether his labours be sublime or low—  
The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct:  
Only the dreamer venoms all his days,  
175 Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.  
Therefore, that happiness be somewhat shar'd,  
Such things as thou art are admitted oft  
Into like gardens thou didst pass erewhile,  
And suffer'd in<sup>o</sup> these temples; for that cause  
180 Thou standest safe beneath this statue's knees."  
"That I am favored for unworthiness,  
By such propitious parley medicin'd  
In sickness not ignoble, I rejoice,  
Aye, and could weep for love of such award."  
185 So answer'd I, continuing, "If it please,  
Majestic shadow, tell me: sure not all<sup>2</sup>  
Those melodies sung into the world's ear  
Are useless: sure a poet is a sage;  
A humanist, physician to all men.  
190 That I am none I feel, as vultures feel  
They are no birds when eagles are abroad.  
What am I then? Thou spakest of my tribe:  
What tribe?"—The tall shade veil'd in drooping white  
Then spake, so much more earnest, that the breath  
195 Mov'd the thin linen folds that drooping hung  
About a golden censer from the hand  
Pendent.—"Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.  
200 The one pours out a balm upon the world,

The other vexes it." Then shouted I  
Spite of myself, and with a Pythia's spleen,<sup>3</sup>  
"Apollo! faded, far flown Apollo!  
Where is thy misty pestilence<sup>4</sup> to creep  
205 Into the dwellings, through the door crannies,  
Of all mock lyrists, large self worshipers,  
And careless hectorers in proud bad verse.<sup>5</sup>  
Though I breathe death with them it will be life  
To see them sprawl before me into graves.<sup>6</sup>  
210 Majestic shadow, tell me where I am:  
Whose altar this; for whom this incense curls:  
What image this, whose face I cannot see,  
For the broad marble knees; and who thou art,  
Of accent feminine, so courteous."  
215 Then the tall shade in drooping linens veil'd  
Spake out, so much more earnest, that her breath  
Stirr'd the thin folds of gauze that drooping hung  
About a golden censer from her hand  
Pendent; and by her voice I knew she shed  
220 Long treasured tears. "This temple sad and lone  
Is all spar'd from the thunder of a war  
Foughten long since by giant hierarchy  
Against rebellion: this old image here,  
Whose carved features wrinkled as he fell,  
225 Is Saturn's;<sup>7</sup> I, Moneta, left supreme  
Sole priestess of his desolation."—  
I had no words to answer; for my tongue,  
Useless, could find about its roofed home  
No syllable of a fit majesty  
230 To make rejoinder to Moneta's mourn.  
There was a silence while the altar's blaze  
Was fainting for sweet food: I look'd thereon  
And on the paved floor, where nigh were pil'd  
Faggots of cinnamon, and many heaps  
235 Of other crisped spice-wood—then again

I look'd upon the altar and its horns  
Whiten'd with ashes, and its lang'rous flame,  
And then upon the offerings again;  
And so by turns—till sad Moneta cried,  
240 "The sacrifice is done, but not the less  
Will I be kind to thee for thy good will.  
My power, which to me is still a curse,  
Shall be to thee a wonder; for the scenes  
Still swooning vivid through my globed brain  
245 With an electral changing misery  
Thou shalt with those dull mortal eyes behold,  
Free from all pain, if wonder pain thee not."  
As near as an immortal's sphered words  
Could to a mother's soften, were these last:  
250 But yet I had a terror of her robes,  
And chiefly of the veils, that from her brow  
Hung pale, and curtain'd her in mysteries  
That made my heart too small to hold its blood.  
This saw that Goddess, and with sacred hand  
255 Parted the veils. Then saw I a wan face,  
Not pin'd<sup>o</sup> by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd  
By an immortal sickness which kills not;  
It works a constant change, which happy death  
Can put no end to; deathwards progressing  
260 To no death was that visage; it had pass'd  
The lily and the snow; and beyond these  
I must not think now, though I saw that face—  
But for her eyes I should have fled away.  
They held me back, with a benignant light,  
265 Soft mitigated by divinest lids  
Half closed, and visionless<sup>o</sup> entire they seem'd  
Of all external things—they saw me not,  
But in blank splendor beam'd like the mild moon,  
Who comforts those she sees not, who knows not  
270 What eyes are upward cast. As I had found  
A grain of gold upon a mountain's side,

And twing'd with avarice strain'd out my eyes  
To search its sullen entrails rich with ore,  
So at the view of sad Moneta's brow,  
275 I ached to see what things the hollow brain  
Behind enwombed: what high tragedy  
In the dark secret chambers of her skull  
Was acting, that could give so dread a stress  
To her cold lips, and fill with such a light  
280 Her planetary eyes; and touch her voice  
With such a sorrow. "Shade of Memory!"  
Cried I, with act adorant at her feet,  
"By all the gloom hung round thy fallen house,  
By this last temple, by the golden age,  
285 By great Apollo, thy dear foster child,  
And by thy self, forlorn divinity,  
The pale Omega<sup>8</sup> of a wither'd race,  
Let me behold, according as thou said'st,  
What in thy brain so ferments to and fro."—  
290 No sooner had this conjuration pass'd  
My devout lips, than side by side we stood,  
(Like a stunt bramble by a solemn pine)  
Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,<sup>9</sup>  
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,  
295 Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star.  
Onward I look'd beneath the gloomy boughs,  
And saw, what first I thought an image huge,  
Like to the image pedestall'd so high  
In Saturn's temple. Then Moneta's voice  
300 Came brief upon mine ear,—"So Saturn sat  
When he had lost his realms."—Whereon there grew  
A power within me of enormous ken,<sup>o</sup>  
To see as a God sees, and take the depth  
Of things as nimbly as the outward eye  
305 Can size and shape pervade. The lofty theme  
At those few words hung vast before my mind,

With half unravel'd web. I set myself  
Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,  
And seeing ne'er forget. No stir of life  
310 Was in this shrouded vale, not so much air  
As in the zoning<sup>o</sup> of a summer's day  
Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,  
But where the deaf leaf fell there did it rest:  
A stream went voiceless by, still deaden'd more  
315 By reason of the fallen divinity  
Spreading more shade: the Naiad<sup>o</sup> mid her reeds  
Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips.  
Along the margin sand large footmarks went  
No farther than to where old Saturn's feet  
320 Had rested, and there slept, how long a sleep!  
Degraded, cold, upon the sodden ground  
His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,  
Unsceptred; and his realmless<sup>1</sup> eyes were clos'd,  
While his bow'd head seem'd listening to the Earth,  
325 His antient mother,<sup>2</sup> for some comfort yet.

It seem'd no force could wake him from his place;  
But there came one who with a kindred hand  
Touch'd his wide shoulders, after bending low  
With reverence, though to one who knew it not.  
330 Then came the griev'd voice of Mnemosyne,<sup>3</sup>  
And griev'd I hearken'd. "That divinity  
Whom thou saw'st step from yon forlornest wood,  
And with slow pace approach our fallen King,  
Is Thea,<sup>4</sup> softest-natur'd of our brood."  
335 I mark'd the goddess in fair statuary  
Surpassing wan Moneta by the head,<sup>5</sup>  
And in her sorrow nearer woman's tears.  
There was a listening fear in her regard,  
As if calamity had but begun;  
340 As if the vanward clouds<sup>6</sup> of evil days

Had spent their malice, and the sullen rear  
Was with its stored thunder labouring up.  
One hand she press'd upon that aching spot  
Where beats the human heart; as if just there,  
345 Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain;  
The other upon Saturn's bended neck  
She laid, and to the level of his hollow ear  
Leaning, with parted lips, some words she spake  
In solemn tenor and deep organ tune;  
350 Some mourning words, which in our feeble tongue  
Would come in this-like accenting; how frail  
To that large utterance of the early Gods!—  
"Saturn! look up—and for what, poor lost King?<sup>7</sup>  
I have no comfort for thee, no—not one:  
355 I cannot cry, *Wherefore thus sleepest thou?*  
For heaven is parted from thee, and the earth  
Knows thee not, so afflicted, for a God;  
And ocean too, with all its solemn noise,  
Has from thy sceptre pass'd, and all the air  
360 Is emptied of thine hoary majesty.  
Thy thunder, captious<sup>o</sup> at the new command,  
Rumbles reluctant o'er our fallen house;  
And thy sharp lightning in unpracticed hands  
Scorches and burns our once serene domain.  
365 With such remorseless speed still come new woes  
That unbelief has not a space to breathe.<sup>8</sup>  
Saturn, sleep on:—Me thoughtless,<sup>9</sup> why should I  
Thus violate thy slumbrous solitude?  
Why should I ope thy melancholy eyes?  
370 Saturn, sleep on, while at thy feet I weep."

As when, upon a tranced summer night,  
Forests, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,<sup>1</sup>  
Dream, and so dream all night, without a noise,  
Save from one gradual solitary gust,



375 Swelling upon the silence; dying off;  
As if the ebbing air had but one wave;  
So came these words, and went; the while in tears  
She press'd her fair large forehead to the earth,  
380 Just where her fallen hair might spread in curls,  
A soft and silken mat for Saturn's feet.  
Long, long, those two were postured motionless,  
Like sculpture builded up upon the grave  
Of their own power. A long awful time  
I look'd upon them; still they were the same;  
385 The frozen God still bending to the earth,  
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet;  
Moneta silent. Without stay or prop  
But my own weak mortality, I bore  
The load of this eternal quietude,  
390 The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes  
Ponderous upon my senses a whole moon.  
For by my burning brain I measured sure  
Her silver seasons shedded on the night,  
And every day by day methought I grew  
395 More gaunt and ghostly. Oftentimes I pray'd  
Intense, that death would take me from the vale  
And all its burthens. Gasping with despair  
Of change, hour after hour I curs'd myself:  
Until old Saturn rais'd his faded eyes,  
400 And look'd around, and saw his kingdom gone,  
And all the gloom and sorrow of the place,  
And that fair kneeling Goddess at his feet.  
As the moist scent of flowers, and grass, and leaves  
Fills forest dells with a pervading air  
405 Known to the woodland nostril, so the words  
Of Saturn fill'd the mossy glooms around,  
Even to the hollows of time-eaten oaks,  
And to the windings in the foxes' hole,  
With sad low tones, while thus he spake, and sent  
Strange musings to the solitary Pan.

410       "Moan, brethren, moan; for we are swallow'd up  
And buried from all godlike exercise  
Of influence benign on planets pale,  
And peaceful sway above man's harvesting,  
415       And all those acts which deity supreme  
Doth ease its heart of love in. Moan and wail.  
Moan, brethren, moan; for lo! the rebel spheres  
Spin round, the stars their antient courses keep,  
Clouds still with shadowy moisture haunt the earth,  
420       Still suck their fill of light from sun and moon,  
Still buds the tree, and still the sea-shores murmur.  
There is no death in all the universe,  
No smell of death—there shall be death<sup>2</sup>—Moan,  
moan,  
Moan, Cybele,<sup>3</sup> moan, for thy pernicious babes  
425       Have chang'd a God into a shaking palsy.  
Moan, brethren, moan; for I have no strength left,  
Weak as the reed—weak—feeble as my voice—  
O, O, the pain, the pain of feebleness.  
Moan, moan; for still I thaw—or give me help:  
430       Throw down those imps<sup>4</sup> and give me victory.  
Let me hear other groans, and trumpets blown  
Of triumph calm, and hymns of festival  
From the gold peaks of heaven's high piled clouds;  
Voices of soft proclaim,<sup>o</sup> and silver stir  
435       Of strings in hollow shells; and let there be  
Beautiful things made new for the surprize  
Of the sky children."—So he feebly ceas'd,  
With such a poor and sickly sounding pause,  
Methought I heard some old man of the earth  
440       Bewailing earthly loss; nor could my eyes  
And ears act with that pleasant unison of sense  
Which marries sweet sound with the grace of form,  
And dolorous accent from a tragic harp

445 With large limb'd visions.<sup>5</sup> More I scrutinized:  
 Still fix'd he sat beneath the sable trees,  
 Whose arms spread straggling in wild serpent forms,  
 With leaves all hush'd: his awful presence there  
 (Now all was silent) gave a deadly lie  
 To what I erewhile heard: only his lips  
 450 Trembled amid the white curls of his beard.  
 They told the truth, though, round, the snowy locks  
 Hung nobly, as upon the face of heaven  
 A midday fleece of clouds. Thea arose  
 And stretch'd her white arm through the hollow dark,  
 455 Pointing some whither: whereat he too rose  
 Like a vast giant seen by men at sea  
 To grow pale from the waves at dull midnight.<sup>6</sup>  
 They melted from my sight into the woods:  
 Ere I could turn, Moneta cried—"These twain  
 460 Are speeding to the families of grief,  
 Where roof'd in by black rocks they waste in pain  
 And darkness for no hope."—And she spake on,  
 As ye may read who can unwearied pass  
 Onward from the antichamber<sup>o</sup> of this dream,  
 465 Where even at the open doors awhile  
 I must delay, and glean my memory  
 Of her high phrase: perhaps no further dare.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: The laurel, associated with Apollo, is the emblem of poetic fame.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In *Paradise Lost* 5.321ff. Eve serves the visiting angel Raphael with a meal of fruits and fruit juices.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The cornucopia, or horn of plenty.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: When Proserpine each year is released by her husband, Pluto, god of the underworld, for a sojourn on Earth, it is the

- beginning of spring.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The drink puts the poet to sleep and effects the dream within a dream that constitutes the remainder of the fragment.[Return to reference 5](#)
  - Note 6: A council of caliphs, Muslim rulers, who plot to kill each other with a poisonous drink ("elixir").[Return to reference 6](#)
  - Note 7: The College of Cardinals. This scenario of poisoning, like the preceding Orientalist reference to intrigue among the caliphs, recalls a stock setting of the period's Gothic novels.[Return to reference 7](#)
  - Note 8: An elderly satyr, usually represented as drunk.[Return to reference 8](#)
  - Note 9: Matthew 6:20: "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt."[Return to reference 9](#)
  - Note 1: Offerings to the gods were spread on the floor of Greek temples.[Return to reference 1](#)
  - Note 2: Who identifies herself in line 226 as Moneta.[Return to reference 2](#)
  - Note 3: Maia was one of the Pleiades, a daughter of Atlas and (by Zeus) the mother of Hermes. She was the goddess of the month of May.[Return to reference 3](#)
  - Note 4: These steps that the poet must ascend were probably suggested by the stairs going up the steep side of the purgatorial mount in Dante's *Purgatorio*.[Return to reference 4](#)
  - Note 5: The ladder by which, in a dream, Jacob saw angels passing between heaven and Earth (Genesis 28:12 and *Paradise Lost* 3.510–15).[Return to reference 5](#)
  - Note 6: As, for example, in Exodus 27:2, "And thou shalt make the horns of [the altar] upon the four corners thereof." In his description of the temple and its accoutrements, Keats deliberately mingles Hebrew, Christian, and pagan elements to represent the poet's passage through the stage represented by all religions, which are "dreams" made into the creed for "a sect" (lines 1–18).[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: That is, you have postponed the time when you will be judged.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Compare Milton's plea, following his account of his blindness, for a celestial light that might "Shine inward":  
"Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence / Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight" (*Paradise Lost* 3.52–54).[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, where you halfway rotted.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Soothing, also truth-telling.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Keats's friend Richard Woodhouse, whose manuscript copy of the poem is our principal source of the text, crossed out lines 187–210 with the marginal comment next to lines 197–99: "K. seems to have intended to erase this & the next 21 lines." Probably the basis for his opinion is the partial repetition of lines 187 and 194–98 in lines 211 and 216–20.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: With the anger ("spleen") of the Pythia, the priestess who served at Delphi as the oracle of Apollo, the god of poetry.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Apollo was a sender of plagues as well as the inspirer of prophecy and poetry. He was also the god of medicine. Keats's medical studies gave him special reason to be interested in this figure and the roles he combined.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: This has been thought to refer to Byron, or else to several contemporaries, including Shelley and Wordsworth. But the poetic types, not individuals, are what matter to Keats's argument.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In lines 147–210 we find a series of progressive distinctions: (1) between humanitarians who feel for "the miseries of the world" and people who are "thoughtless" sleepers (lines 147–53); (2) within the class of humanitarians, between those who actively "benefit . . . the great world" and the poets who are "vision'ries" and "dreamers" (lines 161–69); (3) and within the class of poets, between those who are merely dreamers and those who are sages and healers (lines 187–202). As in the colloquy between Asia and Demogorgon (see Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* 2.4.1–128, pp. 831–34, above), the

interchange here may be taken to represent, in dramatized form, a process of inner analysis and self-discovery on the part of the questing poet.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Compare the “shattered visage” of the fallen statue in Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (p. 786, above).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The final letter of the Greek alphabet.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: This had been the opening line of the original *Hyperion*. The rest of the poem is a revised version of part of that first narrative, with the poet now represented as allowed to envision the course of events that Moneta recalls in her memory (lines 282, 289–90).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Saturn’s eyes, when open, express the fact that he has lost his realm.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Saturn and the other Titans were the children of heaven and Earth.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: As in 2.50, Keats substitutes for “Moneta” the “Mnemosyne” of the first *Hyperion*. This may be a slip but more likely indicates an alternative name for Moneta, in her role as participant in, as well as commentator on, the tragic action.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Sister and wife of Hyperion.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, Thea was a head taller than Moneta.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The front line of clouds.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Keats several times recalls King Lear in representing the condition of Saturn. Keats’s contemporaries may have thought, too, of George III, mad, blind, and dethroned by his son, who had become prince regent.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: That disbelief has not an instant to catch its breath.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, how thoughtless I am![Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The grander version in the first *Hyperion*, 1.72ff., reads: “As when, upon a tranced summer-night / Those green-rob’d senators of mighty woods, / Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars, / Dream.”[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: The passing of the Saturnian golden age (paralleled by Keats with the fable of the loss of Eden) has introduced suffering, and will also introduce death.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The wife of Saturn and mother of the Olympian gods, who have overthrown their parents.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, his rebellious children, the Titans.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, the narrator could not attach this speech, like that of a feebly complaining old mortal, to the visible form of the large-limbed god who uttered it.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, like a giant who is seen at sea to emerge, pale, from the waves.[Return to reference 6](#)

## Notes

- °: *parchment*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *mute*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *opium*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *ruins*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *defects*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *compared to*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *banister*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *aromatic*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *arteries*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *temple*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *on Earth*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *allowed to enter*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *exhausted*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *blind*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *range of vision*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *course*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *water nymph*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *quarrelsome*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *proclamation*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *entry room*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***Canto 2***

“Mortal, that thou may’st understand aright,  
I humanize my sayings to thine ear,  
Making comparisons of earthly things;<sup>7</sup>  
Or thou might’st better listen to the wind,  
Whose language is to thee a barren noise,  
5 Though it blows legend-laden through the trees.  
In melancholy realms big tears are shed,  
More sorrow like to this, and such-like woe,  
Too huge for mortal tongue, or pen of scribe.  
The Titans fierce, self-hid, or prison-bound,  
10 Groan for the old allegiance once more,  
Listening in their doom for Saturn’s voice.  
But one of our whole eagle-brood still keeps  
His sov’reignty, and rule, and majesty;  
Blazing Hyperion on his orbéd fire  
15 Still sits, still snuffs the incense teeming up  
From man to the Sun’s God: yet unsecure;  
For as upon the earth dire prodigies<sup>o</sup>  
Fright and perplex, so also shudders he:  
Nor at dog’s howl, or gloom-bird’s even screech,  
20 Or the familiar visitings of one  
Upon the first toll of his passing bell:<sup>8</sup>  
But horrors portion’d<sup>o</sup> to a giant nerve  
Make great Hyperion ache. His palace bright,  
Bastion’d with pyramids of glowing gold,  
25 And touch’d with shade of bronzed obelisks,  
Glares a blood red through all the thousand courts,  
Arches, and domes, and fiery galleries:  
And all its curtains of Aurorian clouds  
Flush angerly: when he would taste the wreaths  
30 Of incense breath’d aloft from sacred hills,  
Instead of sweets, his ample palate takes



Savour of poisonous brass, and metals sick.  
 Wherefore when harbour'd in the sleepy west,  
 After the full completion of fair day,  
 35 For rest divine upon exalted couch  
 And slumber in the arms of melody,  
 He paces through the pleasant hours of ease,  
 With strides colossal, on from hall to hall;  
 While, far within each aisle and deep recess,  
 40 His winged minions<sup>o</sup> in close clusters stand  
 Amaz'd, and full of fear; like anxious men  
 Who on a wide plain gather in sad troops,  
 When earthquakes jar their battlements and towers.  
 Even now, while Saturn, rous'd from icy trance,  
 45 Goes, step for step, with Thea from yon woods,  
 Hyperion, leaving twilight in the rear,  
 Is sloping to the threshold of the west.  
 Thither we tend."—Now in clear light I stood,  
 Reliev'd from the dusk vale. Mnemosyne  
 50 Was sitting on a square edg'd polish'd stone,  
 That in its lucid depth reflected pure  
 Her priestess-garments. My quick eyes ran on  
 From stately nave to nave, from vault to vault,  
 Through bowers of fragrant and enwreathed light,  
 55 And diamond paved lustrous long arcades.  
 Anon rush'd by the bright Hyperion;  
 His flaming robes stream'd out beyond his heels,  
 And gave a roar, as if of earthly fire,  
 That scar'd away the meek ethereal hours  
 60 And made their dove-wings tremble: on he flared<sup>9</sup>

July–Sept. 1819

1857

## Endnotes

- Note 7: Compare the angel Raphael's words as he begins to recount to Adam the history of the rebellion in heaven: "what surmounts the reach / Of human sense, I shall delineate so, /

By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" (*Paradise Lost* 5.571–73).[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Lines 20–22 might be paraphrased: "Not, however, at such portents as a dog's howl or the evening screech of the owl or with the well-known feelings ['visitings'] of someone when he hears the first stroke of his own death knell." It had been the English custom to ring the church bell when a person was close to death, to invite hearers to pray for his departing soul.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: The manuscript breaks off at this point.[Return to reference 9](#)

## Notes

- °: *terrifying omens*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *proportioned*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *followers*[Return to reference °](#)

# This living hand, now warm and capable<sup>1</sup>

5      This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,  
So in my veins red life might stream again,  
And thou be conscience-calm'd—see, here it is—  
I hold it towards you—

1819

1898

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
These lines, first published in H. B. Forman's edition of Keats's poems in 1898, were written on a sheet that later formed part of the draft of Keats's unfinished satire *The Jealousies*. They have been a key text in late 20th-century critical and theoretical discussions of interpretation. Readings range from the personal and autobiographical—Keats addressing a loved one (Fanny Brawne) or his posthumous readers (for example, users of this Norton anthology)—to the fictionalized and dramatic (for example, a fragment of a speech intended for the deranged Ludolph toward the end of Keats's and Charles Brown's never-produced tragedy *Otho the Great*). In their lyric

[Return to reference 1](#)

**Letters** Keats's letters serve as a running commentary on his life, reading, thinking, and writing. They are, in his career, the equivalent of the essays, prefaces, and defenses of poetry produced by his contemporaries. His early reputation as a poet of pure luxury, sensation, and art for art's sake has undergone a radical change since, in the twentieth century, critics began to pay close attention to the letters. For Keats thought hard and persistently about life and art, and any seed of an ethical or critical idea that he picked up from his contemporaries (in particular, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Wordsworth) instantly germinated and flourished in the rich soil of his imagination. What T. S. Eliot said about the Metaphysical poets applies to Keats in his letters: his "mode of feeling was directly and freshly altered by [his] reading and thought." And like Donne, he looked not only into the heart but, literally, "into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tract." A number of Keats's casual comments on the poet and on poetry included here—especially those dealing with "negative capability" and the kind of imaginative identification with someone or something outside ourselves that we now call empathy—have become standard points of reference in aesthetic theory. But Keats regarded nothing that he said as final; each statement constituted only a stage in his continuing exploration into what he called "the mystery."

The texts here are from the edition of the *Letters* by Hyder E. Rollins (1958), which reproduces the original manuscripts precisely.

## LETTERS

### To Benjamin Bailey<sup>1</sup>

#### ["THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE IMAGINATION"]

[November 22, 1817]

My dear Bailey,

\* \* \* O I wish I was as certain of the end of all your troubles as that of your momentary start about the authenticity of the Imagination. I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth<sup>2</sup>—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty—In a Word, you may know my favorite Speculation by my first Book and the little song<sup>3</sup> I sent in my last—which is a representation from the fancy of the probable mode of operating in these Matters—The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream<sup>4</sup>—he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning<sup>5</sup>—and yet it must be—Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever ~~when~~ arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections—However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations<sup>6</sup> rather than of Thoughts! It is "a Vision in the form of Youth" a Shadow of reality to come—and this consideration has further conv[i]nced me for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite Speculation of mine, that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated<sup>7</sup>—And yet such a fate can only befall those

who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth—Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal<sup>8</sup> reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition. But as I was saying—the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repeti[ti]on of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness—to compare great things with small—have you never by being surprised with an old Melody—in a delicious place—by a delicious voice, fe[l]t over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul—do you not remember forming to yourself the singer's face more beautiful [than] it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so—even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high—that the Prototype must be here after—that delicious face you will see—What a time! I am continually running away from the subject—sure this cannot be exactly the case with a complex Mind—one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its fruits—who would exist partly on sensation partly on thought—to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic Mind<sup>9</sup>—such an one I consider your's and therefore it is necessary to your eternal Happiness that you not only drink this old Wine of Heaven which I shall call the redigestion of our most ethereal Musings on Earth; but also increase in knowledge and know all things. I am glad to hear you are in a fair Way for Easter—you will soon get through your unpleasant reading and then!—but the world is full of troubles and I have not much reason to think myself pesterd with many—I think Jane or Marianne has a better opinion of me than I deserve—for really and truly I do not think my Brothers illness connected with mine—you know more of the real Cause than they do—nor have I any chance of being rack'd as you have been<sup>1</sup>—you perhaps at one time thought there was such a thing as Worldly Happiness to be arrived at, at certain periods of time marked out—you have of necessity from your disposition been thus led away—I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness—I look not for it if it be not in the present hour—nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The

setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a Sparrow come before  
my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.  
The first thing that strikes me on hearing a Misfortune having  
befallen another is this. “Well it cannot be helped.—he will have the  
pleasure of trying the resources of his spirit, and I beg now my dear  
Bailey that hereafter should you observe any thing cold in me not to  
[put] it to the account of heartlessness but abstraction—for I assure  
you I sometimes feel not the influence of a Passion or Affection  
during a whole week—and so long this sometimes continues I begin  
to suspect myself and the genuineness of my feelings at other times—  
thinking them a few barren Tragedy-tears. \* \* \*

Your affectionate friend  
John Keats—

## Endnotes

- Note 1: One of Keats’s closest friends. Keats had stayed with him the month before at Oxford, where Bailey was an undergraduate.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: At the close of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Keats also grapples with these categories. Where Keats uses “truth” we might substitute the words *real* or *reality*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: The song was “O Sorrow,” from book 4 of *Endymion*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: In Milton’s *Paradise Lost* 8.452–90 Adam dreams that Eve has been created and awakes to find her real. Adam also describes an earlier pre-figurative dream in the same work, 8.283–311.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Consecutive reasoning—reasoning that moves by logical steps.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Probably not only sense experiences but also the intuitive perceptions of truths, as opposed to truth achieved by consecutive reasoning.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Compare the “Pleasure Thermometer” in *Endymion* 1.777ff. (p. 949, above).[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Heavenly.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: An echo of Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," line 187.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Keats's friends Jane and Mariane Reynolds feared that his ill health at this time threatened tuberculosis, from which his brother Tom was suffering. Bailey had recently experienced pain (been "racked") because of an unsuccessful love affair.[Return to reference 1](#)



# To George and Thomas Keats

[“NEGATIVE CAPABILITY”]

[December 21, 27 (?), 1817]

My dear Brothers

I must crave your pardon for not having written ere this. \* \* \* I spent Friday evening with Wells<sup>1</sup> & went the next morning to see *Death on the Pale horse*. It is a wonderful picture, when West's<sup>2</sup> age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth<sup>3</sup>—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness—The picture is larger than Christ rejected—I dined with Haydon<sup>4</sup> the sunday after you left, & had a very pleasant day, I dined too (for I have been out too much lately) with Horace Smith & met his two Brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois,<sup>5</sup> they only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment—These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter—They talked of Kean<sup>6</sup> & his low company—Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself! I know such like acquaintance will never do for me & yet I am going to Reynolds, on Wednesday—Brown & Dilke<sup>7</sup> walked with me & back from the Christmas pantomime.<sup>8</sup> I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which

Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*,<sup>9</sup> that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium<sup>1</sup> of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

Shelley's poem<sup>2</sup> is out & there are words about its being objected too, as much as Queen Mab was. Poor Shelley I think he has his Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!! Write soon to your most sincere friend & affectionate Brother

John

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Charles Wells, a former schoolmate of Tom Keats.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Benjamin West (1738–1820), painter of historical pictures, was an American who moved to England and became president of the Royal Academy. The *Christ Rejected* mentioned a few sentences farther on is also by West.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Keats's solution to a problem at least as old as Aristotle's *Poetics*: why do we take pleasure in the aesthetic representation of a subject that in life would be ugly or painful?[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Keats's close friend Benjamin Haydon, painter of large-scale historical and religious pictures.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Smith was one of the best-known literary wits of the day; the others mentioned were men of letters or of literary interests.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Edmund Kean, noted Shakespearean actor. His popularity in the early 19th century was contentious because he

made no secret of his humble class origins. Keats had written an article on Kean for the *Champion*.[Return to reference 6](#)

- Note 7: Charles Armitage Brown, John Hamilton Reynolds, and Charles Wentworth Dilke were all writers and friends of Keats. Keats interrupted the writing of this letter after the dash; beginning with "Brown & Dilke" he is writing several days after the preceding sentences.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Christmas pantomimes were performed each year at Drury Lane and Covent Garden theaters.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: This famous and elusive phrase has been much discussed. Keats coins it so as to distinguish between, on the one hand, a poetry that is evidently shaped by the writer's personal interests and beliefs and, on the other hand, a poetry of impersonality that records the writer's receptivity to the "uncertainties" of experience. This second kind of poetry, in which a sense of beauty overcomes considerations of truth versus falsehood, is that produced by the poet of "negative capability." See Keats's dislike, in his letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, February 3, 1818, of "poetry that has a palpable design upon us."[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: The Latin *penetralia* signified the innermost and most secret parts of a temple.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: *Laon and Cythna* (1817), whose treatment of incest created scandal and which had to be withdrawn by the author. Shelley revised and republished it as *The Revolt of Islam* (1818). In *Queen Mab* (1813) Shelley had presented a radical program for the achievement of a millennial earthly state through the elimination of "kings, priests, and statesmen."[Return to reference 2](#)

# To John Hamilton Reynolds<sup>1</sup>

## [WORDSWORTH'S POETRY]

[February 3, 1818]

My dear Reynolds,

\* \* \* It may be said that we ought to read our Contemporaries, that Wordsworth &c should have their due from us but for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist—Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself—Many a man can travel to the very bourne<sup>2</sup> of Heaven, and yet want confidence to put down his halfseeing. Sancho<sup>3</sup> will invent a Journey heavenward as well as any body. We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket.<sup>4</sup> Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.—How beautiful are the retired flowers! how would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, "admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose! Modern poets differ from the Elizabethans in this. Each of the moderns like an Elector of Hanover governs his petty state, & knows how many straws are swept daily from the Causeways in all his dominions & has a continual itching that all the Housewives should have their coppers well scoured: the antients were ~~Emperors of large~~ Emperors of vast Provinces, they had only heard of the remote ones and scarcely cared to visit them.—I will cut all this—I will have no more of Wordsworth or Hunt<sup>5</sup> in particular—Why should we be of the tribe of Manasseh, when we can wander with Esau?<sup>6</sup> why should we kick against the Pricks, when we can walk on Roses? Why should we be owls, when we can be Eagles?

Why be teased with “nice Eyed wagtails,” when we have in sight “the Cherub Contemplation”?<sup>7</sup>—Why with Wordsworths “Matthew with a bough of wilding in his hand” when we can have Jacques “under an oak &c”<sup>8</sup>—The secret of the Bough of Wilding will run through your head faster than I can write it—Old Matthew spoke to him some years ago on some nothing, & because he happens in an Evening Walk to imagine the figure of the old man—he must stamp it down in black & white, and it is henceforth sacred—I don’t mean to deny Wordsworth’s grandeur & Hunt’s merit, but I mean to say we need not be teased with grandeur & merit—when we can have them uncontaminated & unobtrusive. Let us have the old Poets, & robin Hood<sup>9</sup> Your letter and its sonnets gave me more pleasure than will the 4th Book of Childe Harold<sup>1</sup> & the whole of any body’s life & opinions. \* \* \*

Yr sincere friend and Coscribbler  
John Keats.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A close friend who was at this time an insurance clerk and also an able poet and man of letters.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Boundary.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Sancho Panza, the earthy squire in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: That is, sulks and refuses to interact with us.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Leigh Hunt, a poet who earlier had strongly influenced Keats’s style.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, why should we carry on a conventional way of life (as did the tribe of Manasseh in Old Testament history) when we can become adventurers (like Esau, who sold his birthright in Genesis 25:29–34 and became an outlaw).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Milton, “Il Penseroso,” line 54. “Nice Eyed wagtails”: from Hunt’s *Nymphs*.[Return to reference 7](#)

- Note 8: Shakespeare's *As You Like It* 2.1.31. The Wordsworth phrase is from his poem "The Two April Mornings." "Wilding": a wild apple tree.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: A reference to two sonnets on Robin Hood, written by Reynolds, which he had sent to Keats.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Canto 4 of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was being eagerly awaited by English readers.[Return to reference 1](#)

# To John Taylor<sup>1</sup>

## [KEATS'S AXIOMS IN POETRY]

[February 27, 1818]

My dear Taylor,

Your alteration strikes me as being a great improvement—the page, looks much better. \* \* \* It is a sorry thing for me that any one should have to overcome Prejudices in reading my Verses—that affects me more than any hypercriticism on any particular Passage. In *Endymion* I have most likely but moved into the Go-cart from the leading strings.<sup>2</sup> In Poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre. 1st I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance—2nd Its touches of Beauty should never be half way thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too him—shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight—but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it—and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all. However it may be with me I cannot help looking into new countries with “O for a Muse of fire to ascend!”<sup>3</sup>—If *Endymion* serves me as a Pioneer perhaps I ought to be content. I have great reason to be content, for thank God I can read and perhaps understand Shakspeare to his depths, and I have I am sure many friends, who, if I fail, will attribute any change in my Life and Temper to Humbleness rather than to Pride—to a cowering under the Wings of great Poets rather than to a Bitterness that I am not appreciated. I am anxious to get *Endymion* printed that I may forget it and proceed. \* \* \*

Your sincere and oblig<sup>d</sup> friend  
John Keats—

P.S. You shall have a sho[r]t *Preface* in good time—

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Partner in the publishing firm of Taylor and Hessey, to whom Keats wrote this letter while *Endymion* was being put through the press.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Go-carts were the wheeled walkers in which 19th-century toddlers learned to walk. Leading-strings were the harnesses with which they were guided and supported while they learned. Keats's point appears to be that as a poet he has not advanced and may even have regressed in *Endymion*.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Altered from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Prologue, line 1.[Return to reference 3](#)



# To John Hamilton Reynolds

[MILTON, WORDSWORTH, AND THE CHAMBERS OF HUMAN LIFE]

[May 3, 1818]

My dear Reynolds.

\* \* \* Were I to study physic or rather Medicine again,—I feel it would not make the least difference in my Poetry; when the Mind is in its infancy a Bias is in reality a Bias, but when we have acquired more strength, a Bias becomes no Bias. Every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole. I am so convinced of this, that I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards; and moreover intend through you and Rice to become a sort of Pip-civilian.<sup>1</sup> An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery:<sup>2</sup> a thing I begin to understand a little, and which weighed upon you in the most gloomy and true sentence in your Letter. The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this—in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings<sup>3</sup> and with all [the] horror of a ~~Case~~ bare shoulderd Creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledged<sup>4</sup> and we go thro' the same ~~Fir~~ air and space without fear. \* \* \*

You say "I fear there is little chance of any thing else in this life." You seem by that to have been going through with a more painful and acute ~~test~~ zest the same labyrinth that I have—I have come to the same conclusion thus far. My Branchings out therefrom have been numerous: one of them is the consideration of Wordsworth's genius and as a help, in the manner of gold being the meridian Line of worldly wealth,—how he differs from Milton.<sup>5</sup>—And here I have

nothing but surmises, from an uncertainty whether Miltons apparently less anxiety for Humanity proceeds from his seeing further or no than Wordsworth: And whether Wordsworth has in truth epic passions, and martyrs himself to the human heart, the main region of his song<sup>6</sup>—In regard to his genius alone—we find what he says true as far as we have experienced and we can judge no further but by larger experience—for axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine—things but never feel them to [the] full until we have gone the same steps as the Author.—I know this is not plain; you will know exactly my meaning when I say, that now I shall relish Hamlet more than I ever have done—Or, better—You are sensible no man can set down Venery<sup>7</sup> as a bestial or joyless thing until he is sick of it and therefore all philosophizing on it would be mere wording. Until we are sick, we understand not;—in fine, as Byron says, “Knowledge is Sorrow”;<sup>8</sup> and I go on to say that “Sorrow is Wisdom”—and further for aught we can know for certainty! “Wisdom is folly.” \* \* \*

I will return to Wordsworth—whether or no he has an extended vision or a circumscribed grandeur—whether he is an eagle in his nest, or on the wing—And to be more explicit and to show you how tall I stand by the giant, I will put down a simile of human life as far as I now perceive it; that is, to the point to which I say we both have arrived at—Well—I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me—The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought,<sup>9</sup> than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one

of sharpening one's vision into the ~~head~~ heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the ballance of good and evil. We are in a Mist—*We* are now in that state—We feel the “burden of the Mystery,” To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote “Tintern Abbey” and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them. he is a Genius and superior [to] us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them—Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton—though I think it has depended more upon the general and gregarious advance of intellect, than individual greatness of Mind—From the Paradise Lost and the other Works of Milton, I hope it is not too presuming, even between ourselves to say, his Philosophy, human and divine, may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years, In his time englishmen were just emancipated from a great superstition—and Men had got hold of certain points and resting places in reasoning which were too newly born to be doubted, and too much ~~oppressed~~ opposed by the Mass of Europe not to be thought etherial and authentically divine—who could gainsay his ideas on virtue, vice, and Chastity in Comus, just at the time of the dismissal of Codpieces<sup>1</sup> and a hundred other disgraces? who would not rest satisfied with his hintings at good and evil in the Paradise Lost, when just free from the inquisition and burrrning in Smithfield?<sup>2</sup> The Reformation produced such immediate and great benefits, that Protestantism was considered under the immediate eye of heaven, and its own remaining Dogmas and superstitions, then, as it were, regenerated, constituted those resting places and seeming sure points of Reasoning—from that I have mentioned, Milton, whatever he may have thought in the sequel,<sup>3</sup> appears to have been content with these by his writings—He did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done—Yet Milton as a

Philosop[h]er, had sure as great powers as Wordsworth—What is then to be inferr'd? O many things—It proves there is really a grand march of intellect—, It proves that a mighty providence subdues the mightiest Minds to the service of the time being, whether it be in human Knowledge or Religion— \* \* \* Tom<sup>4</sup> has spit a leetle blood this afternoon, and that is rather a damper—but I know—the truth is there is something real in the World Your third Chamber of Life shall be a lucky and a gentle one—stored with the wine of love—and the Bread of friendship— \* \* \*

Your affectionate friend  
John Keats.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Apparently “a small-scale layman.” James Rice, a lawyer, was one of Keats’s favorite friends.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” line 38.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Recalls the description of Satan’s flight through Chaos (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 2.933–34).[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Grow wings.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: That is, as gold is the standard of material wealth (in the way that the meridian line of Greenwich Observatory, England, is the reference for measuring degrees of longitude), so Milton is the standard of poetic value, by which we may measure Wordsworth.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: In the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, Wordsworth, laying out his poetic program, had identified “the Mind of Man” as “My haunt, and the main region of my song” (lines 40–41).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Sexual indulgence.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: *Manfred* 1.1.10: “Sorrow is knowledge.”[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: That is, innocent thought, with the implication (as in “maiden voyage”) of a first undertaking.[Return to reference 9](#)

- Note 1: In the 15th and 16th centuries, the codpiece was a flap, often ornamental, that covered an opening in the front of men's breeches. In Milton's masque the chastity of a young lady is put to the proof by the evil enchanter Comus.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: An open place northwest of the walls of the City of London where, in the 16th century, heretics were burned.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Later on.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Keats's younger brother, then eighteen, who was dying of tuberculosis.[Return to reference 4](#)

# To Richard Woodhouse<sup>1</sup>

[“A POET HAS NO IDENTITY”]

[October 27, 1818]

My dear Woodhouse,

Your Letter gave me a great satisfaction; more on account of its friendliness, than any relish of that matter in it which is accounted so acceptable in the “genus irritabile”<sup>2</sup> The best answer I can give you is in a clerklike manner to make some observations on two principle points, which seem to point like indices into the midst of the whole pro and con, about genius, and views and atchievements and ambition and coëtera. 1st As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto,<sup>3</sup> be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.<sup>4</sup> What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er, delights the camelion<sup>5</sup> Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation.<sup>6</sup> A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for<sup>7</sup>—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant [have] been cogitating on the Characters of saturn and Ops?<sup>8</sup> It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I

ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to to press upon me<sup>9</sup> that, I am in a very little time an[ni]hilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children: I know not whether I make myself wholly understood: I hope enough so to let you see that no dependence is to be placed on what I said that day.

In the second place I will speak of my views, and of the life I purpose to myself—I am ambitious of doing the world some good: if I should be spared that may be the work of maturer years—in the interval I will assay to reach to as high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer. The faint conceptions I have of Poems to come brings the blood frequently into my forehead—All I hope is that I may not lose all interest in human affairs—that the solitary indifference I feel for applause even from the finest Spirits, will not blunt any acuteness of vision I may have. I do not think it will—I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labours should be burnt every morning and no eye ever shine upon them. But even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live. I am sure however that this next sentence is from myself. I feel your anxiety, good opinion and friendliness in the highest degree, and am

Your's most sincerely  
John Keats

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A young lawyer with literary interests who early recognized Keats's talents and prepared, or preserved, manuscript copies of many of his poems and letters.[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: “The irritable race,” a phrase Horace had applied to poets (*Epistles* 2.2.102).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Hazlitt had defined gusto in an 1816 essay as “power or passion.”[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Iago is the villain in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Imogen the virtuous heroine in his *Cymbeline*.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The chameleon is a lizard that camouflages itself by changing its color to match its surroundings.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: That is, without affecting our practical judgment or actions. Compare Keats’s discussion of “negative capability” in his letter to George and Thomas Keats begun on December 21, 1817 (p. 1009, above).[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Instead of “in for,” Keats may have intended to write “informing.”[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Characters in Keats’s *Hyperion*. Woodhouse had recently written Keats to express concern at a remark by the poet that, because former writers had preempted the best poetic materials and styles, there was nothing new left for the modern poet.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Perhaps “so to press upon me.”[Return to reference 9](#)



# To George and Georgiana Keats<sup>1</sup>

[“THE VALE OF SOUL-MAKING”]

[February 14–May 3, 1819]

My dear Brother & Sister—

\* \* \* I have this moment received a note from Haslam<sup>2</sup> in which he expects the death of his Father who has been for some time in a state of insensibility—his mother bears up he says very well—I shall go to [town] tommorrow to see him. This is the world—thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure—Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting—While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into ~~he~~ the wide arable land of events—while we are laughing it sprouts [it] grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck—Even so we have leisure to reason on the misfortunes of our friends; our own touch us too nearly for words. Very few men have ever arrived at a complete disinterestedness<sup>3</sup> of Mind: very few have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefit of others—in the greater part of the Benefactors of & to Humanity some meretricious motive has sullied their greatness—some melodramatic scenery has facinated them—From the manner in which I feel Haslam’s misfortune I perceive how far I am from any humble standard of disinterestedness—Yet this feeling ought to be carried to its highest pitch, as there is no fear of its ever injuring society—which it would do I fear pushed to an extremity—For in wild nature the Hawk would loose his Breakfast of Robins and the Robin his of Worms The Lion must starve as well as the swallow—The greater part of Men make their way with the same instinctiveness, the same unwandering eye from their purposes, the same animal eagerness as the Hawk—The Hawk wants a Mate, so does the Man—look at them both they set about it and procure on[e] in the same manner—They want both a nest and they both set

about one in the same manner—they get their food in the same manner—The noble animal Man for his amusement smokes his pipe—the Hawk balances about the Clouds—that is the only difference of their leisures. This it is that makes the Amusement of Life—to a speculative Mind. I go among the Feilds and catch a glimpse of a stoat<sup>4</sup> or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass—the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it—I go amongst the buildings of a city and I see a Man hurrying along—to what? The Creature has a purpose and his eyes are bright with it. But then as Wordsworth says, “we have all one human heart”<sup>5</sup>—there is an ellectric fire in human nature tending to purify—so that among these human creature[s] there is continually some birth of new heroism—The pity is that we must wonder at it: as we should at finding a pearl in rubbish—I have no doubt that thousands of people never heard of have had hearts completely disinterested: I can remember but two—Socrates and Jesus—their Histories evince it—What I heard a little time ago, Taylor observe with respect to Socrates, may be said of Jesus—That he was so great as man that though he transmitted no writing of his own to posterity, we have his Mind and his sayings and his greatness handed to us by others. It is to be lamented that the history of the latter was written and revised by Men interested in the pious frauds of Religion. Yet through all this I see his splendour. Even here though I myself am pursuing the same instinctive course as the veriest human animal you can think of—I am however young writing at random—straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness—without knowing the bearing of any one assertion of any one opinion. Yet may I not in this be free from sin? May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful, though instinctive attitude my mind [may] fall into, as I am entertained with the alertness of a Stoat or the anxiety of a Deer? Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows a grace in his quarrel—By a superior being our reasoning[s] may take the same tone—though erroneous they may be fine—This is the very thing in which consists poetry; and if so it is not so fine a thing as philosophy

—For the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth  
—Give me this credit—Do you not think I strive—to know myself?  
Give me this credit—and you will not think that on my own accou[n]t  
I repeat Milton's lines

“How charming is divine Philosophy  
Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose  
But musical as is Apollo's lute”—<sup>6</sup>

No—no for myself—feeling grateful as I do to have got into a state  
of mind to relish them properly—Nothing ever becomes real till it is  
experienced—Even a Proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has  
illustrated it— \* \* \*

\* \* \* I have been reading lately two very different books  
Robertson's America and Voltaire's Siecle De Louis xiv<sup>7</sup> It is like  
walking arm and arm between Pizarro and the great-little Monarch.<sup>8</sup>  
In How lementabl[e] a case do we see the great body of the people  
in both instances: in the first, where Men might seem to inherit quiet  
of Mind from unsophisticated senses; from uncontamination of  
civilisation; and especially from their being as it were estranged from  
the mutual helps of Society and its mutual injuries—and thereby  
more immediately under the Protection of Providence—even there  
they had mortal pains to bear as bad; or even worse than Baliffs,<sup>9</sup>  
Debts and Poverties of civilised Life—The whole appears to resolve  
into this—that Man is originally “a poor forked creature”<sup>1</sup> subject to  
the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to  
hardships and disquietude of some kind or other. If he improves by  
degrees his bodily accommodations and comforts—at each stage, at  
each accent there are waiting for him a fresh set of annoyances—he  
is mortal and there is still a heaven with its Stars abov[e] his head.  
The most interesting question that can come before us is, How far  
by the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates  
Mankind may be made happy—I can imagine such happiness carried  
to an extreme—but what must it end in?—Death—and who could in  
such a case bear with death—the whole troubles of life which are

now frittered away in a series of years, would the[n] be accumulated for the last days of a being who instead of hailing its approach, would leave this world as Eve left Paradise—But in truth I do not at all believe in this sort of perfectibility—the nature of the world will not admit of it—the inhabitants of the world will correspond to itself—Let the fish philosophise the ice away from the Rivers in winter time and they shall be at continual play in the tepid delight of summer. Look at the Poles and at the sands of Africa, Whirlpools and volcanoes—Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly Happiness—The point at which Man may arrive is as far as the paralel state in inanimate nature and no further—For instance suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself—but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun—it can not escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances—they are as native to the world as itself: no more can man be happy in spite, the world[l]y elements will prey upon his nature—The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is “a vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making” Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it) I say “*Soul making*” Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence—There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls ~~the~~ till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. I[n]telligences are atoms of perception—they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God—how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them—so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each ones individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the chrysteain religion—or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation<sup>2</sup>—This is effected by three grand

materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years—These three Materials are the *Intelligence*—the *human heart* (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the *World* or *Elemental space* suited for the proper action of *Mind and Heart* on each other for the purpose of forming the *Soul* or *Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity*. I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive—and yet I think I perceive it—that you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible—I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book*<sup>3</sup> used in that School—and I will call the *Child able to read, the Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity—As various as the Lives of Men are—so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence—This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity—I am convinced that many difficulties which christians labour under would vanish before it—There is one wh[i]ch even now Strikes me—the Salvation of Children—In them the Spark or intelligence returns to God without any identity—it having had no time to learn of, and be altered by, the heart—or seat of the human Passions—It is pretty generally suspected that the chr[i]stian scheme has been copied from the ancient persian and greek Philosophers. Why may they not have made this simple thing even more simple for common apprehension by introducing Mediators and Personages in the same manner as in the hethen mythology abstractions are personified—Seriously I think it probable that this System of Soul-making—may have been the Parent of all the more palpable and personal Schemes of Redemption, among the Zoroastrians the Christians and the Hindoos. For as one part of the human species must have their carved

Jupiter; so another part must have the palpable and named Mediator and saviour, their Christ their Oromanes and their Vishnu<sup>4</sup>—If what I have said should not be plain enough, as I fear it may not be, I will [put] you in the place where I began in this series of thoughts—I mean, I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances—and what are circumstances?—but touchstones of his heart—? and what are touch stones?—but proofings of his heart?<sup>5</sup>—and what are proofings of his heart but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? and what is his altered nature but his soul?—and what was his soul before it came into the world and had These provings and alterations and perfectionings?—An intelligences—without Identity—and how is this Identity to be made? Through the medium of the Heart? And how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of Circumstances?—There now I think what with Poetry and Theology you may thank your Stars that my pen is not very long winded— \* \* \*

This is the 3d of May & every thing is in delightful forwardness; the violets are not withered, before the peeping of the first rose; You must let me know every thing, how parcels go & come, what papers you have, & what Newspapers you want, & other things—God bless you my dear Brother & Sister

Your ever Affectionate Brother  
John Keats—

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Keats's brother and his wife, who had emigrated to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1818. This is part of a long letter that Keats wrote over a period of several months, and into which he transcribed several of his poems, including "Ode to Psyche." The date of this first extract is March 19.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: William Haslam, a young businessman and close friend.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Transcendence of self-interest, of one's selfish instincts.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: A weasel.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: "The Old Cumberland Beggar," line 153.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: *Comus*, lines 475–77.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Two books of history, Voltaire's *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751) and William Robertson's *The History of America* (1777). In this second extract from the journal-letter, Keats is writing toward the end of April (on the 21st or 28th).[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Louis XIV of France. Francisco Pizarro, the Spanish explorer whose exploits are described in Robertson's *America*.[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Officers of the law whose duties included making arrests for bad debts.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Shakespeare's *King Lear* 3.4.95–97. Lear says of "Poor Tom," "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art."[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Keats is struggling for an analogy that will embody his solution to the ancient riddle of evil, as an alternative to what he understands to be the Christian view: that evil exists as a test of the individual's worthiness of salvation in heaven, and this world is only a proving ground for a later and better life. Keats proposes that the function of the human experience of sorrow and pain is to feed and discipline the formless and unstocked "intelligence" that we possess at birth and thus to shape it into a rich and coherent "identity," or "soul." This result provides a justification ("salvation") for our suffering in terms of our earthly life: that is, experience is its own reward.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A child's primer, which used to consist of a sheet of paper mounted on thin wood, protected by a sheet of transparent horn.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The deity who creates and preserves the world, in Hindu belief. Oromanes (Ahriman) was the principle of evil, locked in a persisting struggle with Ormazd, the principle of

good, in the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia.[Return to reference 4](#)

- Note 5: That is, experiences by which the human heart is put to the test.[Return to reference 5](#)



# To Fanny Brawne

[FANNY BRAWNE AS KEATS'S "FAIR STAR"]

[July 25, 1819]

My sweet Girl,

I hope you did not blame me much for not obeying your request of a Letter on Saturday: we have had four in our small room playing at cards night and morning leaving me no undisturb'd opportunity to write. Now Rice and Martin are gone I am at liberty. Brown to my sorrow confirms the account you give of your ill health. You cannot conceive how I ache to be with you: how I would die for one hour—for what is in the world? I say you cannot conceive; it is impossible you should look with such eyes upon me as I have upon you: it cannot be. Forgive me if I wander a little this evening, for I have been all day employ'd in a very abstr[a]ct Poem<sup>1</sup> and I am in deep love with you—two things which must excuse me. I have, believe me, not been an age in letting you take possession of me; the very first week I knew you I wrote myself your vassal; but burnt the Letter as the very next time I saw you I thought you manifested some dislike to me. If you should ever feel for Man at the first sight what I did for you, I am lost. Yet I should not quarrel with you, but hate myself if such a thing were to happen—only I should burst if the thing were not as fine as a Man as you are as a Woman. Perhaps I am too vehement, then fancy me on my knees, especially when I mention a part of your Letter which hurt me; you say speaking of Mr. Severn<sup>2</sup> "but you must be satisfied in knowing that I admired you much more than your friend." My dear love, I cannot believe there ever was or ever could be any thing to admire in me especially as far as sight goes—I cannot be admired, I am not a thing to be admired. You are, I love you; all I can bring you is a swooning admiration of your Beauty. I hold that place among Men which snub-nos'd brunettes with meeting eyebrows do among women—they are trash

to me—unless I should find one among them with a fire in her heart like the one that burns in mine. You absorb me in spite of myself—you alone: for I look not forward with any pleasure to what is call'd being settled in the world; I tremble at domestic cares—yet for you I would meet them, though if it would leave you the happier I would rather die than do so. I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it. From no others would I take it. I am indeed astonish'd to find myself so careless of all cha[r]ms but yours—remembring as I do the time when even a bit of ribband was a matter of interest with me. What softer words can I find for you after this—what it is I will not read. Nor will I say more here, but in a Postscript answer any thing else you may have mentioned in your Letter in so many words—for I am distracted with a thousand thoughts. I will imagine you Venus tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Hethen.<sup>3</sup>

Your's ever, fair Star,  
John Keats.

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Probably *The Fall of Hyperion*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Joseph Severn, who later looked after Keats in Rome during his final illness.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: See Keats's sonnet "Bright star" (pp. 963–64, above) for parallels to this and other remarks in the present letter.[Return to reference 3](#)

# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY

## 1797–1851

Percy Shelley wrote of his young wife, in the Dedication to *Laon and Cythna*:

They say that thou wert lovely from thy birth,  
Of glorious parents, thou aspiring Child.

The “glorious parents” were William Godwin, the leading reformer and radical philosopher of the time, and Mary Wollstonecraft, famed as the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Wollstonecraft had died from childbed fever when she gave birth to Mary. Four years later Godwin married a widow, Mary Jane Clairmont, who soon had more than she could cope with trying to manage a family of five children of diverse parentage, amid increasing financial difficulties. Mary bitterly resented her stepmother but adored her father, who, she later said, “was my God—and I remember many childish instances of the excess of attachment I bore for him.”

To ease the situation Mary was sent at the age of fourteen to live in Dundee, Scotland, with the family of William Baxter, an admirer of Godwin. After two pleasant years roaming the countryside, daydreaming, and writing stories (which have been lost), she returned in 1814 to her father’s house in London. There, at the age of sixteen, she encountered the twenty-one-year-old poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, a devotee of Godwin’s and an almost daily visitor,

who had become estranged from his wife, Harriet. The young people fell in love; within a few months Mary was pregnant. On July 28 they ran off to Europe, taking with them her stepsister Jane Clairmont, who later changed her name to Claire. Mary described their happy though heedless wanderings through France, Switzerland, and Germany in her first book, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, published anonymously in 1817.

Back in England she gave premature birth to a daughter who lived only twelve days; a year later, in 1816, she bore a son, William. Shelley was usually in financial difficulties and often had to hide from his creditors to avoid arrest. Nonetheless, he contributed substantial sums (borrowed against his expectations as heir to his father, Sir Timothy) to Godwin's support, even though Godwin, despite his earlier advocacy of free love, refused to countenance Shelley's liaison with his daughter. Claire Clairmont meanwhile sought out and had a brief affair with Byron, who left her pregnant. In the spring of 1816, the Shelleys went abroad again with Claire, and at the latter's behest settled in Geneva, where Byron, accompanied by his physician and friend John William Polidori, set up residence in the nearby Villa Diodati. Mary Shelley tells us, in the introduction to *Frankenstein*, how her imagination was fired by their animated conversations during many social evenings. Encouraged and assisted by Shelley, she wrote *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, her story of the man of science who, with catastrophic consequences, seeks to conquer nature, rival the divinity, and make new life, and who then withholds love from the life he has made. Since its anonymous publication in 1818, the novel has never been out of print. As the basis for innumerable plays (beginning in 1823) and movies (beginning in 1910), the story has become a central myth of modern Western culture.

The last six years of Mary's life with her husband, spent first in England and then in Italy, were filled with disasters. In October 1816 her sensitive and moody half-sister, Fanny Imlay, feeling herself an unloved burden on the Godwin household, committed suicide by an overdose of laudanum. Two months later Shelley's abandoned wife,

Harriet, pregnant by an unknown lover, drowned herself in the Serpentine lake at Hyde Park in London. Shelley at once married Mary, but the courts denied him custody of Harriet's two children on the grounds that he was morally unfit to rear them. In September 1818 came the death of Mary's third baby, Clara, followed less than nine months later by the death from malaria, rampant in Rome at the time, of her adored son, William: "We came to Italy thinking to do Shelley's health good," Mary wrote bitterly, "but the Climate is not [by] any means warm enough to be of benefit to him & yet it is that that has destroyed my two children." These tragedies and her own ill health threw her into a depression that was only partly relieved by the birth of a second son, Percy Florence, in November 1819, and was deepened again the next spring by a miscarriage, as later by the death, in April 1822, of Claire's daughter, Allegra, whom Byron had placed in an Italian convent. Mary Shelley's habitual reserve, which masked the depth of her feelings, now became an apathy that caused her to withdraw, emotionally, from her husband. He became distant in turn, giving their friend Jane Williams the affection he denied his wife. When he was drowned in the Gulf of Spezia in July 1822, Mary was left with a persisting sense that she had failed her husband when he most needed her.

An impoverished widow of twenty-four, she returned to England with two ambitions. One was to disseminate the poetry and to rescue the character of Shelley, whom she idolized in memory; the other was to support by her writings her surviving son. Her only financial assistance was a small allowance given her by Sir Timothy Shelley, which he threatened to cut off if she wrote a biography of his radical and scandal-haunted son. In the remaining quarter century of her life, Mary Shelley became a notable success as a professional woman of letters, publishing as "The Author of 'Frankenstein' " to comply with Sir Timothy's demand that she never use the Shelley name. After *Frankenstein* she wrote first a novella and then five more novels, of which the first two are the best. The novella, *Matilda*, written in 1819 but left in manuscript and not published until 1959, deals with the disastrous results of a father's

incestuous passion for a daughter who resembles his dead wife. *Valperga* (1823), set in the Italian Middle Ages, is a historical romance about a quasi-Napoleonic figure who sacrifices his love and humanity to his lust for political power and about the two women whom he betrays. *The Last Man* (1826), set in the twenty-first century, tracing the progress of a plague that destroys all of humankind except for one survivor, the novel's narrator, almost equals *Frankenstein* in its analysis of human isolation. This novel also served Shelley as a forum in which to write autobiographically, for as she reflected in a diary entry, her own companions, like her ever-mourning narrator's, were gone, become "the people of the grave." She in fact arranged to endow two characters in the novel, her narrator's associates, with traits recognizably those of Percy Shelley and Byron, whose death in Greece occurred as she began writing.

Shelley all this while also contributed short stories to the gift books and literary annuals that were a publishing phenomenon during the 1820s and 1830s: deluxe volumes, gorgeously bound and lavishly illustrated, whose literary selections mingled pieces by esteemed authors—Scott, Hemans, Wordsworth, Coleridge—with contributions by the most fashionable members of the aristocracy. (All writers, however, were by the makers of gift books deemed less important than the visual artists: the stories or poems were often commissioned to accompany preexisting illustrations.) In 1835–39 she contributed to the *Cabinet Cyclopaedia* five volumes of admirable biographical and critical studies of continental authors. She also published several separate editions of her husband's writings in verse and prose. In accordance with what was then standard editorial procedure, she altered and emended Shelley's texts; she also added prefaces and notes, relating Shelley's writings to the circumstances of his life and thought, that have been an important resource for scholars of Romantic literature.

Not until old Sir Timothy died in 1844, leaving his title and estate to her son, did she find herself in comfortable circumstances. Her last years were cheered by the devotion of her son—who was an

amiable man but entirely lacked the genius of his parents—and by her close friendship with Jane St. John, an admirer of Shelley's poetry, whom Sir Percy Florence married in 1848. Mary Shelley died three years later, at the age of fifty-three.

During her widowhood she craved social acceptance and status and, although she maintained liberal principles, tried hard, by adapting herself to conventional standards in her writings and her life, to work free from the onus of what her contemporaries regarded as the scandalous careers of her mother, father, and husband. In later life she wrote an apologia in her journal, dated October 21, 1838, that reveals the stresses of a life spent trying to measure up to the example, yet escape the bad reputations, of her parents and husband.

In the first place, with regard to "the good cause"—the cause of the advancement of freedom and knowledge, of the rights of women, etc.—I am not a person of opinions. . . . Some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it. . . . For myself, I earnestly desire the good and enlightenment of my fellow creatures, and see all, in the present course, tending to the same, and rejoice; but I am not for violent extremes, which only brings on an injurious reaction. . . .

To hang back, as I do, brings a penalty. I was nursed and fed with a love of glory. To be something great and good was the precept given me by my father; Shelley reiterated it. . . . But Shelley died, and I was alone. . . . My total friendlessness, my horror of pushing, and inability to put myself forward unless led, cherished and supported—all this has sunk me in a state of loneliness no other human

being ever before, I believe, endured—except Robinson Crusoe. . . .

But I have never crouched to society—never sought it unworthily. If I have never written to vindicate the rights of women, I have ever defended women when oppressed. At every risk I have befriended and supported victims to the social system; but I make no boast, for in truth it is simple justice I perform; and so am I still reviled for being worldly. . . .

Such as I have written appears to me the exact truth.



# ***From The Last Man***

## ***Introduction***<sup>1</sup>

I visited Naples in the year 1818. On the 8th of December of that year, my companion and I crossed the Bay, to visit the antiquities which are scattered on the shores of Baiae.<sup>2</sup> The translucent and shining waters of the calm sea covered fragments of old Roman villas, which were interlaced by sea-weed, and received diamond tints from the chequering of the sun-beams; the blue and pellucid element was such as Galatea<sup>3</sup> might have skimmed in her car of mother of pearl; or Cleopatra, more fitly than the Nile, have chosen as the path of her magic ship.<sup>4</sup> Though it was winter, the atmosphere seemed more appropriate to early spring; and its genial warmth contributed to inspire those sensations of placid delight, which are the portion of every traveller, as he lingers, loath to quit the tranquil bays and radiant promontories of Baiae.

We visited the so called Elysian Fields and Avernus:<sup>5</sup> and wandered through various ruined temples, baths, and classic spots; at length we entered the gloomy cavern of the Cumaean Sibyl.<sup>6</sup> Our Lazzeroni<sup>7</sup> bore flaring torches, which shone red, and almost dusky, in the murky subterranean passages, whose darkness thirstily surrounding them, seemed eager to imbibe more and more of the element of light. We passed by a natural archway, leading to a second gallery, and enquired, if we could not enter there also. The guides pointed to the reflection of their torches on the water that paved it, leaving us to form our own conclusion; but adding it was a pity, for it led to the Sibyl's Cave. Our curiosity and enthusiasm were excited by this circumstance, and we insisted upon attempting the passage. As is usually the case in the prosecution of such enterprizes, the difficulties decreased on examination. We found, on each side of the humid pathway, "dry land for the sole of the foot."<sup>8</sup>

At length we arrived at a large, desert, dark cavern, which the Lazzeroni assured us was the Sibyl's Cave. We were sufficiently disappointed—Yet we examined it with care, as if its blank, rocky walls could still bear trace of celestial visitant. On one side was a small opening. Whither does this lead? we asked: can we enter here?—"Questo poi, no,"<sup>9</sup>—said the wild looking savage, who held the torch; "you can advance but a short distance, and nobody visits it."

"Nevertheless, I will try it," said my companion; "it may lead to the real cavern. Shall I go alone, or will you accompany me?"

I signified my readiness to proceed, but our guides protested against such a measure. With great volubility, in their native Neapolitan dialect, with which we were not very familiar, they told us that there were spectres, that the roof would fall in, that it was too narrow to admit us, that there was a deep hole within, filled with water, and we might be drowned. My friend shortened the harangue, by taking the man's torch from him; and we proceeded alone.

The passage, which at first scarcely admitted us, quickly grew narrower and lower; we were almost bent double; yet still we persisted in making our way through it. At length we entered a wider space, and the low roof heightened; but, as we congratulated ourselves on this change, our torch was extinguished by a current of air, and we were left in utter darkness. The guides bring with them materials for renewing the light, but we had none—our only resource was to return as we came. We groped round the widened space to find the entrance, and after a time fancied that we had succeeded. This proved however to be a second passage, which evidently ascended. It terminated like the former; though something approaching to a ray, we could not tell whence, shed a very doubtful twilight in the space. By degrees, our eyes grew somewhat accustomed to this dimness, and we perceived that there was no direct passage leading us further; but that it was possible to climb one side of the cavern to a low arch at top, which promised a more easy path, from whence we now discovered that this light proceeded. With considerable difficulty we scrambled up, and came

to another passage with still more of illumination, and this led to another ascent like the former.

After a succession of these, which our resolution alone permitted us to surmount, we arrived at a wide cavern with an arched dome-like roof. An aperture in the midst let in the light of heaven; but this was overgrown with brambles and underwood, which acted as a veil, obscuring the day, and giving a solemn religious hue to the apartment. It was spacious, and nearly circular, with a raised seat of stone, about the size of a Grecian couch, at one end. The only sign that life had been here, was the perfect snow-white skeleton of a goat, which had probably not perceived the opening as it grazed on the hill above, and had fallen headlong. Ages perhaps had elapsed since this catastrophe; and the ruin it had made above, had been repaired by the growth of vegetation during many hundred summers.

The rest of the furniture of the cavern consisted of piles of leaves, fragments of bark, and a white filmy substance, resembling the inner part of the green hood which shelters the grain of the unripe Indian corn. We were fatigued by our struggles to attain this point, and seated ourselves on the rocky couch, while the sounds of tinkling sheep-bells, and shout of shepherd-boy, reached us from above.

At length my friend, who had taken up some of the leaves strewn about, exclaimed, "This *is* the Sibyl's cave; these are Sibylline leaves." On examination, we found that all the leaves, bark, and other substances were traced with written characters. What appeared to us more astonishing, was that these writings were expressed in various languages: some unknown to my companion, ancient Chaldee,<sup>1</sup> and Egyptian hieroglyphics, old as the Pyramids. Stranger still, some were in modern dialects, English and Italian. We could make out little by the dim light, but they seemed to contain prophecies, detailed relations of events but lately passed; names, now well known, but of modern date; and often exclamations of exultation or woe, of victory or defeat, were traced on their thin scant pages. This was certainly the Sibyl's Cave; not indeed exactly

as Virgil describes it; but the whole of this land had been so convulsed by earthquake and volcano, that the change was not wonderful, though the traces of ruin were effaced by time; and we probably owed the preservation of these leaves, to the accident which had closed the mouth of the cavern, and the swift-growing vegetation which had rendered its sole opening impervious to the storm. We made a hasty selection of such of the leaves, whose writing one at least of us could understand; and then, laden with our treasure, we bade adieu to the dim hypaethric<sup>2</sup> cavern, and after much difficulty succeeded in rejoining our guides.

During our stay at Naples, we often returned to this cave, sometimes alone, skimming the sun-lit sea, and each time added to our store. Since that period, whenever the world's circumstance has not imperiously called me away, or the temper of my mind impeded such study, I have been employed in deciphering these sacred remains. Their meaning, wondrous and eloquent, has often repaid my toil, soothing me in sorrow, and exciting my imagination to daring flights, through the immensity of nature and the mind of man. For awhile my labours were not solitary; but that time is gone; and, with the selected and matchless companion of my toils, their dearest reward is also lost to me—

Di mie tenere frondi altro lavoro  
Credea mostrarte; e qual fero pianeta  
Ne 'nvidiò insieme, o mio nobil tesoro?<sup>3</sup>

I present the public with my latest discoveries in the slight Sibylline pages. Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumaean damsel obtained from heaven.

I have often wondered at the subject of her verses, and at the English dress of the Latin poet. Sometimes I have thought that, obscure and chaotic as they are, they owe their present form to me, their decipherer. As if we should give to another artist, the painted

fragments which form the mosaic copy of Raphael's Transfiguration in St. Peter's; he would put them together in a form, whose mode would be fashioned by his own peculiar mind and talent.<sup>4</sup> Doubtless the leaves of the Cumaean Sibyl have suffered distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them, is that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition.

My labours have cheered long hours of solitude, and taken me out of a world, which has averted its once benignant face from me, to one glowing with imagination and power. Will my readers ask how I could find solace from the narration of misery and woeful change? This is one of the mysteries of our nature, which holds full sway over me, and from whose influence I cannot escape. I confess, that I have not been unmoved by the development of the tale; and that I have been depressed, nay, agonized, at some parts of the recital, which I have faithfully transcribed from my materials. Yet such is human nature, that the excitement of mind was dear to me, and that the imagination, painter of tempest and earthquake, or, worse, the stormy and ruin-fraught passions of man, softened my real sorrows and endless regrets, by clothing these fictitious ones in that ideality, which takes the mortal sting from pain.

I hardly know whether this apology is necessary. For the merits of my adaptation and translation must decide how far I have well bestowed my time and imperfect powers, in giving form and substance to the frail and attenuated Leaves of the Sibyl.

1824

1826

## Endnotes

- Note 1: A contribution to Romantic-period investigations of the nature of creativity, Shelley's Introduction to *The Last Man* (composed 1824 and published at the start of 1826) enigmatically identifies the novel that follows as a strange blend of creative work, transcription, and translation, in which biography (Shelley's personal history of suffering) is subsumed by history and myth. Playing with the convention of Gothic

romances that involves the protagonist's discovery of a decaying, all but illegible, manuscript from the past, Shelley leaves it an open question whether she is the editor or author of her "sibylline leaves."[Return to reference 1](#)

- Note 2: Shelley begins with an actual event—the visit she and Percy paid in December 1818 to the ancient Roman resort of Baiae near Naples. See "Ode to the West Wind," lines 32–34 (p. 803, above).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Name given to a sea nymph in Greek mythology.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: See Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra's ship in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2.197–203.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: Sites near Naples named for places in mythology: the fields thought to be inhabited after death by those favored by the gods and the entrance to the underworld, by tradition located at Lake Avernus.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The prophetess, inspired by the god Apollo, whose mad frenzies and cryptic accounts of future history are most famously described in the *Aeneid*, book 6. Other accounts describe how the sibyl wrote her prophecies on leaves, which she placed at the entrance to her cave; when the wind dispersed them, they became unintelligible. Coleridge had titled his 1817 collection of poems *Sibylline Leaves* so as to allude, he said, "to the fragmentary and widely scattered state in which [the poems] have been long suffered to remain."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Generic term for the poor of Naples, here employed as guides.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Allusion to Genesis 8:9: the dove sent by Noah from the ark finds "no rest for the sole of her foot."[Return to reference 8](#)
- Note 9: Definitely not! (Italian).[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: Language of ancient Babylon, famed for its astronomical and astrological knowledge.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Open to the sky.[Return to reference 2](#)

- Note 3: Quoted from the Italian of a sonnet by Petrarch (1304–1374): “From my tender leaves, I thought to show you a different work, and what fierce planet ended our being together, oh, my noble treasure?”[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: The Italian Renaissance artist Raphael’s painting of the transfiguration of Christ is copied in mosaic on the altarpiece of the Cappella Clementina of St. Peter’s in Rome.[Return to reference 4](#)

# The Mortal Immortal<sup>1</sup>

## *A Tale*

JULY 16, 1833.—This is a memorable anniversary for me; on it I complete my three hundred and twenty-third year!

The Wandering Jew?<sup>2</sup>—certainly not. More than eighteen centuries have passed over his head. In comparison with him, I am a very young Immortal.

Am I, then, immortal? This is a question which I have asked myself, by day and night, for now three hundred and three years, and yet cannot answer it. I detected a gray hair amidst my brown locks this very day—that surely signifies decay. Yet it may have remained concealed there for three hundred years—for some persons have become entirely white-headed before twenty years of age.

I will tell my story, and my reader shall judge for me. I will tell my story, and so contrive to pass some few hours of a long eternity, become so wearisome to me. For ever! Can it be? to live for ever! I have heard of enchantments, in which the victims were plunged into a deep sleep, to wake, after a hundred years, as fresh as ever: I have heard of the Seven Sleepers<sup>3</sup>—thus to be immortal would not be so burthensome: but, oh! the weight of never-ending time—the tedious passage of the still-succeeding hours! How happy was the fabled Nourjahad!<sup>4</sup>—But to my task.

All the world has heard of Cornelius Agrippa.<sup>5</sup> His memory is as immortal as his arts have made me. All the world has also heard of his scholar, who, unawares, raised the foul fiend during his master's absence, and was destroyed by him.<sup>6</sup> The report, true or false, of this accident, was attended with many inconveniences to the renowned philosopher. All his scholars at once deserted him—his servants disappeared. He had no one near him to put coals on his



ever-burning fires while he slept, or to attend to the changeful colours of his medicines while he studied. Experiment after experiment failed, because one pair of hands was insufficient to complete them: the dark spirits laughed at him for not being able to retain a single mortal in his service.

I was then very young—very poor—and very much in love. I had been for about a year the pupil of Cornelius, though I was absent when this accident took place. On my return, my friends implored me not to return to the alchymist's abode. I trembled as I listened to the dire tale they told; I required no second warning; and when Cornelius came and offered me a purse of gold if I would remain under his roof, I felt as if Satan himself tempted me. My teeth chattered—my hair stood on end:—I ran off as fast as my trembling knees would permit.

My failing steps were directed whither for two years they had every evening been attracted,—a gently bubbling spring of pure living waters, beside which lingered a dark-haired girl, whose beaming eyes were fixed on the path I was accustomed each night to tread. I cannot remember the hour when I did not love Bertha; we had been neighbours and playmates from infancy—her parents, like mine, were of humble life, yet respectable—our attachment had been a source of pleasure to them. In an evil hour, a malignant fever carried off both her father and mother, and Bertha became an orphan. She would have found a home beneath my paternal roof, but, unfortunately, the old lady of the near castle, rich, childless, and solitary, declared her intention to adopt her. Henceforth Bertha was clad in silk—inhabited a marble palace—and was looked on as being highly favoured by fortune. But in her new situation among her new associates, Bertha remained true to the friend of her humbler days; she often visited the cottage of my father, and when forbidden to go thither, she would stray towards the neighbouring wood, and meet me beside its shady fountain.

She often declared that she owed no duty to her new protectress equal in sanctity to that which bound us. Yet still I was too poor to marry, and she grew weary of being tormented on my account. She

had a haughty but an impatient spirit, and grew angry at the obstacles that prevented our union. We met now after an absence, and she had been sorely beset while I was away; she complained bitterly, and almost reproached me for being poor. I replied hastily,—

“I am honest, if I am poor!—were I not, I might soon become rich!” This exclamation produced a thousand questions. I feared to shock her by owning the truth, but she drew it from me; and then, casting a look of disdain on me, she said—

“You pretend to love, and you fear to face the Devil for my sake!”

I protested that I had only dreaded to offend her;—while she dwelt on the magnitude of the reward that I should receive. Thus encouraged—shamed by her—led on by love and hope, laughing at my late fears, with quick steps and a light heart, I returned to accept the offers of the alchymist, and was instantly installed in my office.

A year passed away. I became possessed of no insignificant sum of money. Custom had banished my fears. In spite of the most painful vigilance, I had never detected the trace of a cloven foot; nor was the studious silence of our abode ever disturbed by demoniac howls. I still continued my stolen interviews with Bertha, and Hope dawned on me—Hope—but not perfect joy; for Bertha fancied that love and security were enemies, and her pleasure was to divide them in my bosom. Though true of heart, she was somewhat of a coquette in manner; and I was jealous as a Turk. She slighted me in a thousand ways, yet would never acknowledge herself to be in the wrong. She would drive me mad with anger, and then force me to beg her pardon. Sometimes she fancied that I was not sufficiently submissive, and then she had some story of a rival, favoured by her protectress. She was surrounded by silk-clad youths—the rich and gay—What chance had the sad-robed scholar of Cornelius compared with these?

On one occasion, the philosopher made such large demands upon my time, that I was unable to meet her as I was wont. He was engaged in some mighty work, and I was forced to remain, day and night, feeding his furnaces and watching his chemical preparations. Bertha waited for me in vain at the fountain. Her haughty spirit fired

at this neglect; and when at last I stole out during the few short minutes allotted to me for slumber, and hoped to be consoled by her, she received me with disdain, dismissed me in scorn, and vowed that any man should possess her hand rather than he who could not be in two places at once for her sake. She would be revenged!—And truly she was. In my dingy retreat I heard that she had been hunting, attended by Albert Hoffer. Albert Hoffer was favoured by her protectress, and the three passed in cavalcade before my smoky window. Methought that they mentioned my name—it was followed by a laugh of derision, as her dark eyes glanced contemptuously towards my abode.

Jealousy, with all its venom, and all its misery, entered my breast. Now I shed a torrent of tears, to think that I should never call her mine; and, anon, I imprecated a thousand curses on her inconstancy. Yet, still I must stir the fires of the alchymist, still attend on the changes of his unintelligible medicines.

Cornelius had watched for three days and nights, nor closed his eyes. The progress of his alembics<sup>7</sup> was slower than he expected: in spite of his anxiety, sleep weighed upon his eyelids. Again and again he threw off drowsiness with more than human energy; again and again it stole away his senses. He eyed his crucibles wistfully. "Not ready yet," he murmured; "will another night pass before the work is accomplished? Winzy,<sup>8</sup> you are vigilant—you are faithful—you have slept, my boy—you slept last night. Look at that glass vessel. The liquid it contains is of a soft rose-colour: the moment it begins to change its hue, awaken me—till then I may close my eyes. First, it will turn white, and then emit golden flashes; but wait not till then; when the rose-colour fades, rouse me." I scarcely heard the last words, muttered, as they were, in sleep. Even then he did not quite yield to nature. "Winzy, my boy," he again said, "do not touch the vessel—do not put it to your lips; it is a philter<sup>9</sup>—a philter to cure love; you would not cease to love your Bertha—beware to drink!"

And he slept. His venerable head sunk on his breast, and I scarce heard his regular breathing. For a few minutes I watched the vessel—the rosy hue of the liquid remained unchanged. Then my thoughts

wandered—they visited the fountain, and dwelt on a thousand charming scenes never to be renewed—never! Serpents and adders were in my heart as the word “Never!” half formed itself on my lips. False girl!—false and cruel! Never more would she smile on me as that evening she smiled on Albert. Worthless, detested woman! I would not remain unrevenged—she should see Albert expire at her feet—she should die beneath my vengeance. She had smiled in disdain and triumph—she knew my wretchedness and her power. Yet what power had she?—the power of exciting my hate—my utter scorn—my—oh, all but indifference! Could I attain that—could I regard her with careless eyes, transferring my rejected love to one fairer and more true, that were indeed a victory!

A bright flash darted before my eyes. I had forgotten the medicine of the adept; I gazed on it with wonder: flashes of admirable beauty, more bright than those which the diamond emits when the sun’s rays are on it, glanced from the surface of the liquid; an odour the most fragrant and grateful stole over my sense; the vessel seemed one globe of living radiance, lovely to the eye, and most inviting to the taste. The first thought, instinctively inspired by the grosser sense, was, I will—I must drink. I raised the vessel to my lips. “It will cure me of love—of torture!” Already I had quaffed half of the most delicious liquor ever tasted by the palate of man, when the philosopher stirred. I started—I dropped the glass—the fluid flamed and glanced along the floor, while I felt Cornelius’s gripe at my throat, as he shrieked aloud, “Wretch! you have destroyed the labour of my life!”

The philosopher was totally unaware that I had drunk any portion of his drug. His idea was, and I gave a tacit assent to it, that I had raised the vessel from curiosity, and that, frightened at its brightness, and the flashes of intense light it gave forth, I had let it fall. I never undeceived him. The fire of the medicine was quenched—the fragrance died away—he grew calm, as a philosopher should under the heaviest trials, and dismissed me to rest.

I will not attempt to describe the sleep of glory and bliss which bathed my soul in paradise during the remaining hours of that

memorable night. Words would be faint and shallow types of my enjoyment, or of the gladness that possessed my bosom when I woke. I trod air—my thoughts were in heaven. Earth appeared heaven, and my inheritance upon it was to be one trance of delight. “This it is to be cured of love,” I thought; “I will see Bertha this day, and she will find her lover cold and regardless; too happy to be disdainful, yet how utterly indifferent to her!”

The hours danced away. The philosopher, secure that he had once succeeded, and believing that he might again, began to concoct the same medicine once more. He was shut up with his books and drugs, and I had a holiday. I dressed myself with care; I looked in an old but polished shield, which served me for a mirror; methought my good looks had wonderfully improved. I hurried beyond the precincts of the town, joy in my soul, the beauty of heaven and earth around me. I turned my steps towards the castle—I could look on its lofty turrets with lightness of heart, for I was cured of love. My Bertha saw me afar off, as I came up the avenue. I know not what sudden impulse animated her bosom, but at the sight, she sprung with a light fawn-like bound down the marble steps, and was hastening towards me. But I had been perceived by another person. The old high-born hag, who called herself her protectress, and was her tyrant, had seen me, also; she hobbled, panting, up the terrace; a page, as ugly as herself, held up her train, and fanned her as she hurried along, and stopped my fair girl with a “How, now, my bold mistress? whither so fast? Back to your cage—hawks are abroad!”<sup>1</sup>

Bertha clasped her hands—her eyes were still bent on my approaching figure. I saw the contest. How I abhorred the old crone who checked the kind impulses of my Bertha’s softening heart. Hitherto, respect for her rank had caused me to avoid the lady of the castle; now I disdained such trivial considerations. I was cured of love, and lifted above all human fears; I hastened forwards, and soon reached the terrace. How lovely Bertha looked! her eyes flashing fire, her cheeks glowing with impatience and anger, she was

a thousand times more graceful and charming than ever—I no longer loved—Oh! no, I adored—worshipped—idolized her!

She had that morning been persecuted, with more than usual vehemence, to consent to an immediate marriage with my rival. She was reproached with the encouragement that she had shown him—she was threatened with being turned out of doors with disgrace and shame. Her proud spirit rose in arms at the threat; but when she remembered the scorn that she had heaped upon me, and how, perhaps, she had thus lost one whom she now regarded as her only friend, she wept with remorse and rage. At that moment I appeared. “O, Winzy!” she exclaimed, “take me to your mother’s cot; swiftly let me leave the detested luxuries and wretchedness of this noble dwelling—take me to poverty and happiness.”

I clasped her in my arms with transport. The old lady was speechless with fury, and broke forth into invective only when we were far on our road to my natal cottage. My mother received the fair fugitive, escaped from a gilt cage to nature and liberty, with tenderness and joy; my father, who loved her, welcomed her heartily; it was a day of rejoicing, which did not need the addition of the celestial potion of the alchymist to steep me in delight.

Soon after this eventful day, I became the husband of Bertha. I ceased to be the scholar of Cornelius, but I continued his friend. I always felt grateful to him for having, unawares, procured me that delicious draught of a divine elixir, which, instead of curing me of love (sad cure! solitary and joyless remedy for evils which seem blessings to the memory), had inspired me with courage and resolution, thus winning for me an inestimable treasure in my Bertha.

I often called to mind that period of trance-like inebriation with wonder. The drink of Cornelius had not fulfilled the task for which he affirmed that it had been prepared, but its effects were more potent and blissful than words can express. They had faded by degrees, yet they lingered long—and painted life in hues of splendour. Bertha often wondered at my lightness of heart and unaccustomed gaiety; for, before, I had been rather serious, or even sad, in my disposition.

She loved me the better for my cheerful temper, and our days were winged by joy.

Five years afterwards I was suddenly summoned to the bedside of the dying Cornelius. He had sent for me in haste, conjuring my instant presence. I found him stretched on his pallet, enfeebled even to death; all of life that yet remained animated his piercing eyes, and they were fixed on a glass vessel, full of a roseate liquid.

"Behold," he said, in a broken and inward voice, "the vanity of human wishes! a second time my hopes are about to be crowned, a second time they are destroyed. Look at that liquor—you remember five years ago I had prepared the same, with the same success;—then, as now, my thirsting lips expected to taste the immortal elixir—you dashed it from me! and at present it is too late."

He spoke with difficulty, and fell back on his pillow. I could not help saying,—

"How, revered master, can a cure for love restore you to life?"

A faint smile gleamed across his face as I listened earnestly to his scarcely intelligible answer.

"A cure for love and for all things—the Elixir of Immortality. Ah! if now I might drink, I should live for ever!"

As he spoke, a golden flash gleamed from the fluid; a well-remembered fragrance stole over the air; he raised himself, all weak as he was—strength seemed miraculously to re-enter his frame—he stretched forth his hand—a loud explosion startled me—a ray of fire shot up from the elixir, and the glass vessel which contained it was shivered to atoms! I turned my eyes towards the philosopher; he had fallen back—his eyes were glassy—his features rigid—he was dead!

But I lived, and was to live for ever! So said the unfortunate alchymist, and for a few days I believed his words. I remembered the glorious drunkenness that had followed my stolen draught. I reflected on the change I had felt in my frame—in my soul. The bounding elasticity of the one—the buoyant lightness of the other. I surveyed myself in a mirror, and could perceive no change in my features during the space of the five years which had elapsed. I

remembered the radiant hues and grateful scent of that delicious beverage—worthy the gift it was capable of bestowing—I was, then, IMMORTAL!

A few days after I laughed at my credulity. The old proverb, that “a prophet is least regarded in his own country,” was true with respect to me and my defunct master. I loved him as a man—I respected him as a sage—but I derided the notion that he could command the powers of darkness, and laughed at the superstitious fears with which he was regarded by the vulgar. He was a wise philosopher, but had no acquaintance with any spirits but those clad in flesh and blood. His science was simply human; and human science, I soon persuaded myself, could never conquer nature’s laws so far as to imprison the soul for ever within its carnal habitation. Cornelius had brewed a soul-refreshing drink—more inebriating than wine—sweeter and more fragrant than any fruit: it possessed probably strong medicinal powers, imparting gladness to the heart and vigor to the limbs; but its effects would wear out; already were they diminished in my frame. I was a lucky fellow to have quaffed health and joyous spirits, and perhaps long life, at my master’s hands; but my good fortune ended there: longevity was far different from immortality.

I continued to entertain this belief for many years. Sometimes a thought stole across me—Was the alchymist indeed deceived? But my habitual credence was, that I should meet the fate of all the children of Adam at my appointed time—a little late, but still at a natural age. Yet it was certain that I retained a wonderfully youthful look. I was laughed at for my vanity in consulting the mirror so often, but I consulted it in vain—my brow was untrenched—my cheeks—my eyes—my whole person continued as untarnished as in my twentieth year.

I was troubled. I looked at the faded beauty of Bertha—I seemed more like her son. By degrees our neighbours began to make similar observations, and I found at last that I went by the name of the Scholar bewitched. Bertha herself grew uneasy. She became jealous and peevish, and at length she began to question me. We had no



children; we were all in all to each other; and though, as she grew older, her vivacious spirit became a little allied to ill-temper, and her beauty sadly diminished, I cherished her in my heart as the mistress I had idolized, the wife I had sought and won with such perfect love.

At last our situation became intolerable: Bertha was fifty—I twenty years of age. I had, in very shame, in some measure adopted the habits of a more advanced age; I no longer mingled in the dance among the young and gay, but my heart bounded along with them while I restrained my feet; and a sorry figure I cut among the Nestors<sup>2</sup> of our village. But before the time I mention, things were altered—we were universally shunned; we were—at least, I was—reported to have kept up an iniquitous acquaintance with some of my former master's supposed friends. Poor Bertha was pitied, but deserted. I was regarded with horror and detestation.

What was to be done? we sat by our winter fire—poverty had made itself felt, for none would buy the produce of my farm; and often I had been forced to journey twenty miles, to some place where I was not known, to dispose of our property. It is true we had saved something for an evil day—that day was come.

We sat by our lone fireside—the old-hearted youth and his antiquated wife. Again Bertha insisted on knowing the truth; she recapitulated all she had ever heard said about me, and added her own observations. She conjured me to cast off the spell; she described how much more comely gray hairs were than my chestnut locks; she descanted on the reverence and respect due to age—how preferable to the slight regard paid to mere children: could I imagine that the despicable gifts of youth and good looks outweighed disgrace, hatred, and scorn? Nay, in the end I should be burnt as a dealer in the black art, while she, to whom I had not deigned to communicate any portion of my good fortune, might be stoned as my accomplice. At length she insinuated that I must share my secret with her, and bestow on her like benefits to those I myself enjoyed, or she would denounce me—and then she burst into tears.

Thus beset, methought it was the best way to tell the truth. I revealed it as tenderly as I could, and spoke only of a *very long life*,

not of immortality—which representation, indeed, coincided best with my own ideas. When I ended, I rose and said,

“And now, my Bertha, will you denounce the lover of your youth?—You will not, I know. But it is too hard, my poor wife, that you should suffer from my ill-luck and the accursed arts of Cornelius. I will leave you—you have wealth enough, and friends will return in my absence. I will go; young as I seem, and strong as I am, I can work and gain my bread among strangers, unsuspected and unknown. I loved you in youth; God is my witness that I would not desert you in age, but that your safety and happiness require it.”

I took my cap and moved towards the door; in a moment Bertha’s arms were round my neck, and her lips were pressed to mine. “No, my husband, my Winzy,” she said, “you shall not go alone—take me with you; we will remove from this place, and, as you say, among strangers we shall be unsuspected and safe. I am not so very old as quite to shame you, my Winzy; and I dare say the charm will soon wear off, and, with the blessing of God, you will become more elderly-looking, as is fitting; you shall not leave me.”

I returned the good soul’s embrace heartily. “I will not, my Bertha; but for your sake I had not thought of such a thing. I will be your true, faithful husband while you are spared to me, and do my duty by you to the last.”

The next day we prepared secretly for our emigration. We were obliged to make great pecuniary sacrifices—it could not be helped. We realised a sum sufficient, at least, to maintain us while Bertha lived; and, without saying adieu to anyone, quitted our native country to take refuge in a remote part of western France.

It was a cruel thing to transport poor Bertha from her native village, and the friends of her youth, to a new country, new language, new customs. The strange secret of my destiny rendered this removal immaterial to me; but I compassionated her deeply, and was glad to perceive that she found compensation for her misfortunes in a variety of little ridiculous circumstances. Away from all tell-tale chroniclers, she sought to decrease the apparent disparity of our ages by a thousand feminine arts—rouge, youthful dress, and

assumed juvenility of manner. I could not be angry—Did not I myself wear a mask? Why quarrel with hers, because it was less successful? I grieved deeply when I remembered that this was my Bertha, whom I had loved so fondly, and won with such transport—the dark-eyed, dark-haired girl, with smiles of enchanting archness and a step like a fawn—this mincing, simpering, jealous old woman. I should have revered her gray locks and withered cheeks; but thus!—It was my work, I knew; but I did not the less deplore this type of human weakness.

Her jealousy never slept. Her chief occupation was to discover that, in spite of outward appearances, I was myself growing old. I verily believe that the poor soul loved me truly in her heart, but never had woman so tormenting a mode of displaying fondness. She would discern wrinkles in my face and decrepitude in my walk, while I bounded along in youthful vigour, the youngest looking of twenty youths. I never dared address another woman: on one occasion, fancying that the belle of the village regarded me with favouring eyes, she bought me a gray wig. Her constant discourse among her acquaintances was, that though I looked so young, there was ruin at work within my frame; and she affirmed that the worst symptom about me was my apparent health. My youth was a disease, she said, and I ought at all times to prepare, if not for a sudden and awful death, at least to awake some morning white-headed, and bowed down with all the marks of advanced years. I let her talk—I often joined in her conjectures. Her warnings chimed in with my never-ceasing speculations concerning my state, and I took an earnest, though painful, interest in listening to all that her quick wit and excited imagination could say on the subject.

Why dwell on these minute circumstances? We lived on for many long years. Bertha became bed-ridden and paralytic: I nursed her as a mother might a child. She grew peevish, and still harped upon one string—of how long I should survive her. It has ever been a source of consolation to me, that I performed my duty scrupulously towards her. She had been mine in youth, she was mine in age, and at last,

when I heaped the sod over her corpse, I wept to feel that I had lost all that really bound me to humanity.

Since then how many have been my cares and woes, how few and empty my enjoyments! I pause here in my history—I will pursue it no further. A sailor without rudder or compass, tossed on a stormy sea—a traveller lost on a widespread heath, without landmark or star to guide him—such have I been: more lost, more hopeless than either. A nearing ship, a gleam from some far cot, may save them; but I have no beacon except the hope of death.

Death! mysterious, ill-visaged friend of weak humanity! Why alone of all mortals have you cast me from your sheltering fold? O, for the peace of the grave! the deep silence of the iron-bound tomb! that thought would cease to work in my brain, and my heart beat no more with emotions varied only by new forms of sadness!

Am I immortal? I return to my first question. In the first place, is it not more probable that the beverage of the alchymist was fraught rather with longevity than eternal life? Such is my hope. And then be it remembered, that I only drank *half* of the potion prepared by him. Was not the whole necessary to complete the charm? To have drained half the Elixir of Immortality is but to be half immortal—my For-ever is thus truncated and null.

But again, who shall number the years of the half of eternity? I often try to imagine by what rule the infinite may be divided. Sometimes I fancy age advancing upon me. One gray hair I have found. Fool! do I lament? Yes, the fear of age and death often creeps coldly into my heart; and the more I live, the more I dread death, even while I abhor life. Such an enigma is man—born to perish—when he wars, as I do, against the established laws of his nature.

But for this anomaly of feeling surely I might die: the medicine of the alchymist would not be proof against fire—sword—and the strangling waters. I have gazed upon the blue depths of many a placid lake, and the tumultuous rushing of many a mighty river, and have said, peace inhabits those waters; yet I have turned my steps away, to live yet another day. I have asked myself, whether suicide

would be a crime in one to whom thus only the portals of the other world could be opened. I have done all, except presenting myself as a soldier or duellist, an object of destruction to my—no, *not* my fellow-mortals, and therefore I have shrunk away. They are not my fellows. The inextinguishable power of life in my frame, and their ephemeral existence, place us wide as the poles asunder. I could not raise a hand against the meanest or the most powerful among them.

Thus I have lived on for many a year—alone, and weary of myself—desirous of death, yet never dying—a mortal immortal. Neither ambition nor avarice can enter my mind, and the ardent love that gnaws at my heart, never to be returned—never to find an equal on which to expend itself—lives there only to torment me.

This very day I conceived a design by which I may end all—without self-slaughter, without making another man a Cain—an expedition, which mortal frame can never survive, even endued with the youth and strength that inhabits mine. Thus I shall put my immortality to the test, and rest for ever—or return, the wonder and benefactor of the human species.<sup>3</sup>

Before I go, a miserable vanity has caused me to pen these pages. I would not die, and leave no name behind. Three centuries have passed since I quaffed the fatal beverage: another year shall not elapse before, encountering gigantic dangers—warring with the powers of frost in their home—beset by famine, toil, and tempest—I yield this body, too tenacious a cage for a soul which thirsts for freedom, to the destructive elements of air and water—or, if I survive, my name shall be recorded as one of the most famous among the sons of men; and, my task achieved, I shall adopt more resolute means, and, by scattering and annihilating the atoms that compose my frame, set at liberty the life imprisoned within, and so cruelly prevented from soaring from this dim earth to a sphere more congenial to its immortal essence.

- Note 1: Compare Keats's *Endymion* 1.843–44: "if this earthly love has power to make / Men's being mortal, immortal." "The Mortal Immortal" is one of the sixteen stories Shelley during her career contributed to *The Keepsake*, a gift book published annually between 1828 and 1857. This tale shares its first-person narrative form and interest in the consequences of scientific ambition with Shelley's best-known novel. With a certain irony, given its original setting in a volume that its publisher marketed as a lasting memento of affection that might be purchased for a loved one, "The Mortal Immortal" also examines the question of whether love can survive time's ravages if beauty does not.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The man who, according to legend, taunted Christ on the road to the crucifixion and was therefore condemned to wander the Earth until Judgment Day.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Legendary Christian youths who took refuge in a cave in Ephesus to escape their pagan persecutors and slept for 187 years.[Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Title character of Frances Sheridan's Oriental tale of 1767, who is tricked into believing that he has become immortal and that, when he sleeps, he does so for several years at a time.[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The 16th-century German researcher of the occult and the alchemical sciences. Agrippa's works are among the books that Victor Frankenstein reads when young and that prompt him to begin "the search of the philosopher's stone" (which had the power to transmute base metal into gold) and of "the elixir of life"; his "favourite authors" also promise to teach the "raising of ghosts or devils."[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: The story was told by Robert Southey in a 1798 poem titled "Cornelius Agrippa: A Ballad of a Young Man That Would Read Unlawful Books."[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Distilling apparatuses that Agrippa uses in his alchemical investigations.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: The narrator's name suggests the Scots *winze*, meaning "curse."[Return to reference 8](#)

- Note 9: Magic potion.[Return to reference 9](#)
- Note 1: In the *Keepsake* volume this is the scene that the artist and engraver picture.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Village elders. In the *Iliad* Nestor is the old and battle-scarred advisor to the Greek army.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: Compare Walton in *Frankenstein*, who describes his expedition to the North Pole as conferring “inestimable benefit . . . on all mankind to the last generation,” or Frankenstein, who likewise anticipates the gratitude of posterity: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source.”[Return to reference 3](#)

# LETITIA ELIZABETH LANDON

## 1802–1838

Letitia Elizabeth Landon, whose initials became one of the most famous literary pseudonyms of nineteenth-century Britain, was born and educated in Chelsea, London. She published her first poem in the weekly *Literary Gazette* in March 1820, when she was seventeen, and soon thereafter became a principal writer and reviewer for the magazine. Her first important collection of poems, published in 1824, was *The Improvisatrice*—a work that suggests Landon's fascination with Germaine de Staël's *Corinne* and with the Italy that she never visited but encountered in the pages of Staël, the Shelleys, and Byron. It went through six editions in its first year and was followed by *The Troubadour*, *Catalogue of Pictures*, and *Historical Sketches* (1825), which went through four. She quickly followed these with *The Golden Violet* (1827), the first of many editions of her *Poetical Works* (1827), and *The Venetian Bracelet* (1829). Her fiction includes *Romance and Reality* (1831), a high-society novel with sharp observations on contemporary literature, manners, and fashion, as well as the historical novel *Ethel Churchill, or The Two Brides* (1837); she also wrote essays, short fiction, children's stories, and a play. On top of this, she edited—and contributed hundreds of poems to—the albums, gift books, and annual anthologies that became a staple of British literary production of the 1820s and 1830s. All this highly remunerative work appeared from the pen of "L. E. L.," the pseudonym that she first used in the



*Literary Gazette* and that attracted increasing numbers of readers and also poetic responses, as it was disclosed by stages that the author behind the initials was female, young, and a great beauty.

Landon and Felicia Hemans, as “L. E. L.” and “Mrs. Hemans,” were two of the bestselling poets of their time—the decade and a half following the deaths of Keats, Percy Shelley, and Byron in the early 1820s—and were major inspirations to subsequent writers such as Elizabeth Barrett and Christina Rossetti. Unlike Hemans, Landon attracted scandal, partly because of her casual social relations with men and partly because of her principal subject matter, the joys and especially the sorrows of female passion. Landon’s position as a young, single female writer, busily socializing in London’s literary scene, also attracted notice. Her father had for a time done well enough in business to rent a large country house, but was eventually bankrupted and abandoned the family in 1820 (he would die four years later); these straitened circumstances may have prompted Landon’s first forays into publication. After a falling-out with her mother, whom she continued to support financially, Landon lived first with her grandmother, then, from 1826 on, on her own in an attic room that would become part of her legend. There were rumors of affairs with, among others, her promoter William Jerdan, who was editor of the *Literary Gazette*, the journalist William Maginn, and the artist Daniel Maclise. Landon’s biographer Lucasta Miller, building on research by scholar Cynthia Lawford, has found evidence that Landon gave birth to three illegitimate children, with Jerdan the probable father; though there were gossipy hints in the press about these pregnancies, Landon and her defenders seem mostly to have succeeded in screening them from view, or at least to have kept matters ambiguous enough to maintain her reputation. (Miller also suggests that Jerdan’s exploitative management of Landon’s career, along with the financial support Landon gave relatives, goes some way toward explaining why Landon worked herself to the point of exhaustion despite the considerable earning power of her “brand.”) An engagement to the editor John Forster, future biographer of Dickens, was broken off due to the rumors that followed her. In 1838

she married someone she had known for only a short time, George Maclean, governor of the British settlement at Cape Coast Castle, west Africa (in what is now Ghana). She arrived with Maclean at Cape Coast in August 1838 and two months later was dead, reportedly from an overdose of prussic acid. Wild rumors—of suicide or of murder (at the hands, some speculated, of Maclean's jealous African mistress or mistresses)—began circulating when news of Landon's death reached England. They appear now to have been unfounded. The nineteenth-century public insisted, however, on using Landon's poetic personas to interpret the circumstances of her death.

Landon perfected, and reviewers helped maintain, several of these personas: the pseudonymous, therefore anonymous, writer of passionate love lyrics; the Romantic "improvisatrice" jotting down verses in the interstices of an intense social life; the renowned beauty who constantly fails in love and, in lamenting her crushed feelings, becomes the female equivalent of the Byronic hero; and an early version of the Victorian "poetess" composing songs to appeal to a burgeoning cult of domesticity. As in Hemans's poetry, some of these personas are not wholly compatible with some of the others. But their variety and vitality captivated readers.

# ***From The Improvisatrice***

## ***Sappho's Song***<sup>1</sup>

Farewell, my lute!—and would that I  
Had never waked thy burning chords!  
Poison has been upon thy sigh,  
And fever has breathed in thy words.

5 Yet wherefore, wherefore should I blame  
Thy power, thy spell, my gentlest lute?  
I should have been the wretch I am,  
Had every chord of thine been mute.

10 It was my evil star above,  
Not my sweet lute, that wrought me wrong;  
It was not song that taught me love,  
But it was love that taught me song.

15 If song be past, and hope undone,  
And pulse, and head, and heart, are flame;  
It is thy work, thou faithless one!  
But, no!—I will not name thy name!

20 Sun-god, lute, wreath, are vowed to thee!  
Long be their light upon my grave—  
My glorious grave—yon deep blue sea:  
I shall sleep calm beneath its wave!

1824

## **Endnotes**

- Note 1: From Landon's long poem *The Improvisatrice*, which she described in a prefatory comment as "an attempt to illustrate that species of inspiration common in Italy, where the mind is warmed from earliest childhood by all that is beautiful in Nature and glorious in Art." In this song, however, Landon's heroine, an artist and a poet who performs her compositions, looks to Greece and to the legends that had grown up around Sappho (7th century B.C.E.), founder of the lyric tradition, whose poems have survived only in fragmentary form. Presented as a renunciation of song, and even as a suicide note of sorts, this poem draws particularly on the legend that tells of how Sappho drowned herself in the Aegean Sea, distraught over the handsome boatman Phaon's refusal to reciprocate her love.[Return to reference 1](#)

# Lines

## ***Written under a Picture of a Girl Burning a Love-Letter***

The lines were filled with many a tender thing,  
All the impassioned heart's fond communing.

I took the scroll: I could not brook  
    An eye to gaze on it, save mine;  
I could not bear another's look  
    Should dwell upon one thought of thine.  
5 My lamp was burning by my side,  
    I held thy letter to the flame,  
I marked the blaze swift o'er it glide,  
    It did not even spare thy name.  
Soon the light from the embers past,  
    I felt so sad to see it die,  
10 So bright at first, so dark at last,  
    I feared it was love's history.

1824

## Love's Last Lesson

“Teach it me, if you can,—forgetfulness!<sup>1</sup>  
I surely shall forget, if you can bid me;  
I who have worshipped thee, my god on earth,  
I who have bow’d me at thy lightest word.  
5 Your last command, ‘Forget me,’ will it not  
Sink deeply down within my inmost soul?  
Forget thee!—ay, forgetfulness will be  
A mercy to me. By the many nights  
When I have wept for that I dared not sleep,—  
A dream had made me live my woes again,  
10 Acting my wretchedness, without the hope  
My foolish heart still clings to, though that hope  
Is like the opiate which may lull a while,  
Then wake to double torture; by the days  
Pass’d in lone watching and in anxious fears,  
15 When a breath sent the crimson to my cheek,  
Like the red gushing of a sudden wound;  
By all the careless looks and careless words  
Which have to me been like the scorpion’s stinging;  
By happiness blighted, and by thee, for ever;  
20 By thy eternal work of wretchedness;  
By all my wither’d feelings, ruin’d health,  
Crush’d hopes, and rifled heart, I will forget thee!  
Alas! my words are vanity. Forget thee!  
Thy work of wasting is too surely done.  
25 The April shower may pass and be forgotten,  
The rose fall and one fresh spring in its place,  
And thus it may be with light summer love.  
It was not thus with mine: it did not spring,  
Like the bright colour on an evening cloud,  
Into a moment’s life, brief, beautiful;

30 Not amid lighted halls, when flatteries  
Steal on the ear like dew upon the rose,  
As soft, as soon dispersed, as quickly pass'd;  
But you first call'd my woman's feelings forth,  
35 And taught me love ere I had dream'd love's name.  
I loved unconsciously: your name was all  
That seem'd in language, and to me the world  
Was only made for you; in solitude,  
When passions hold their interchange together,  
40 Your image was the shadow of my thought;  
Never did slave, before his Eastern lord,  
Tremble as I did when I met your eye,  
And yet each look was counted as a prize;  
I laid your words up in my heart like pearls  
45 Hid in the ocean's treasure-cave. At last  
I learn'd my heart's deep secret: for I hoped,  
I dream'd you loved me; wonder, fear, delight,  
Swept my heart like a storm; my soul, my life,  
Seem'd all too little for your happiness;  
50 Had I been mistress of the starry worlds  
That light the midnight, they had all been yours,  
And I had deem'd such boon but poverty.  
As it was, I gave all I could—my love,  
My deep, my true, my fervent, faithful love;  
55 And now you bid me learn forgetfulness:  
It is a lesson that I soon shall learn.  
There is a home of quiet for the wretched,  
A somewhat dark, and cold, and silent rest,  
But still it is rest,—for it is the grave.”  
60

She flung aside the scroll, as it had part  
In her great misery. Why should she write?  
What could she write? Her woman's pride forbade  
To let him look upon her heart, and see  
It was an utter ruin;—and cold words,  
And scorn and slight, that may repay his own,

65 Were as a foreign language, to whose sound  
She might not frame her utterance. Down she bent  
Her head upon an arm so white that tears  
Seem'd but the natural melting of its snow,  
70 Touch'd by the flush'd cheek's crimson; yet life-blood  
Less wrings in shedding than such tears as those.

And this then is love's ending! It is like  
The history of some fair southern clime.  
Hot fires are in the bosom of the earth,  
75 And the warm'd soil puts forth its thousand flowers,  
Its fruits of gold, summer's regality,  
And sleep and odours float upon the air:  
At length the subterranean element  
Breaks from its secret dwelling-place, and lays  
80 All waste before it; the red lava stream  
Sweeps like the pestilence; and that which was  
A garden in its colours and its breath,  
Fit for the princess of a fairy tale,  
Is as a desert, in whose burning sands,  
85 And ashy waters, who is there can trace  
A sign, a memory of its former beauty?  
It is thus with the heart; love lights it up  
With hopes like young companions, and with joys  
Dreaming deliciously of their sweet selves.  
90

This is at first; but what is the result?  
Hopes that lie mute in their own sullenness,  
For they have quarrell'd even with themselves;  
And joys indeed like birds of Paradise:<sup>2</sup>  
And in their stead despair coils scorpion-like  
95 Stinging itself;<sup>3</sup> and the heart, burnt and crush'd  
With passion's earthquake, scorch'd and wither'd up,  
Lies in its desolation,—this is love.

What is the tale that I would tell? Not one



100 Of strange adventure, but a common tale  
Of woman's wretchedness; one to be read  
Daily in many a young and blighted heart.  
The lady whom I spake of rose again  
From the red fever's couch, to careless eyes  
Perchance the same as she had ever been.  
105 But oh, how alter'd to herself! She felt  
That bird-like pining for some gentle home  
To which affection might attach itself,  
That weariness which hath but outward part  
In what the world calls pleasure, and that chill  
110 Which makes life taste the bitterness of death.

And he she loved so well,—what opiate  
Lull'd consciousness into its selfish sleep?—  
He said he loved her not; that never vow  
Or passionate pleading won her soul for him;  
115 And that he guess'd not her deep tenderness.

Are words, then, only false? are there no looks,  
Mute but most eloquent; no gentle cares  
That win so much upon the fair weak things  
They seem to guard? And had he not long read  
120 Her heart's hush'd secret in the soft dark eye  
Lighted at his approach, and on the cheek  
Colouring all crimson at his lightest look?  
This is the truth; his spirit wholly turn'd  
To stern ambition's dream, to that fierce strife  
125 Which leads to life's high places, and reck'd not  
What lovely flowers might perish in his path.

And here at length is somewhat of revenge:  
For man's most golden dreams of pride and power  
Are vain as any woman-dreams of love;  
130 Both end in weary brow and wither'd heart,  
And the grave closes over those whose hopes

Have lain there long before.

1827

## Endnotes

- Note 1: An allusion to Byron's *Manfred* 1.1.135–36: "What wouldst thou with us, son of mortals—say?"—to which Manfred replies, "Forgetfulness." Other Byronic echoes in lines 14–15, 18–23, 85–86, and 95–98 further link Landon's speaker to the protagonists of *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: In Eastern tales, the bird of Paradise never rests on the earth [*Landon's note*].[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: In *The Giaour: A Fragment of a Turkish Tale* (1813), Byron had written of how "The Mind, that broods o'er guilty woes, / Is like the Scorpion girt by fire" (lines 423–24).[Return to reference 3](#)

## Notes

- °: *cared*[Return to reference °](#)

# Lines of Life

Orphan in my first years, I early learnt  
To make my heart suffice itself, and seek  
Support and sympathy in its own depths.<sup>1</sup>

Well, read my cheek, and watch my eye, —  
Too strictly school'd are they,  
One secret of my soul to show,  
One hidden thought betray.

5 I never knew the time my heart  
Look'd freely from my brow;  
It once was check'd by timidity,  
'Tis taught by caution now.

10 I live among the cold, the false,  
And I must seem like them;  
And such I am, for I am false  
As those I most condemn.

15 I teach my lip its sweetest smile,  
My tongue its softest tone;  
I borrow others' likeness, till  
Almost I lose my own.

20 I pass through flattery's gilded sieve,  
Whatever I would say;  
In social life, all, like the blind,  
Must learn to feel their way.

I check my thoughts like curbed steeds  
That struggle with the rein;

I bid my feelings sleep, like wrecks  
In the unfathom'd main.

25 I hear them speak of love, the deep,  
The true, and mock the name;  
Mock at all high and early truth,  
And I too do the same.

I hear them tell some touching tale,  
I swallow down the tear;  
30 I hear them name some generous deed,  
And I have learnt to sneer.

I hear the spiritual, the kind,  
The pure, but named in mirth;  
35 Till all of good, ay, even hope,  
Seems exiled from our earth.

And one fear, withering ridicule,  
Is all that I can dread;  
A sword hung by a single hair  
40 For ever o'er the head.

We bow to a most servile faith,  
In a most servile fear;  
While none among us dares to say  
What none will choose to hear.

45 And if we dream of loftier thoughts,  
In weakness they are gone;  
And indolence and vanity  
Rivet our fetters on.

Surely I was not born for this!  
I feel a loftier mood  
50 Of generous impulse, high resolve,  
Steal o'er my solitude!

I gaze upon the thousand stars  
That fill the midnight sky;  
And wish, so passionately wish,  
55 A light like theirs on high.

I have such eagerness of hope  
To benefit my kind;  
And feel as if immortal power  
60 Were given to my mind.

I think on that eternal fame,  
The sun of earthly gloom,  
Which makes the gloriousness of death,  
The future of the tomb —

That earthly future, the faint sign  
65 Of a more heavenly one;  
— A step, a word, a voice, a look, —  
Alas! my dream is done.

And earth, and earth's debasing stain,  
70 Again is on my soul;  
And I am but a nameless part  
Of a most worthless whole.

Why write I this? because my heart  
Towards the future springs,  
75 That future where it loves to soar  
On more than eagle wings.

The present, it is but a speck  
In that eternal time,  
In which my lost hopes find a home,  
80 My spirit knows its clime.

Oh! not myself, — for what am I? —

The worthless and the weak,  
Whose every thought of self should raise  
A blush to burn my cheek.

85 But song has touch'd my lips with fire,  
And made my heart a shrine;  
For what, although alloy'd, debased,  
Is in itself divine.

I am myself but a vile link  
Amid life's weary chain;  
90 But I have spoken hallow'd words,  
Oh do not say in vain!

My first, my last, my only wish,  
Say will my charmed chords  
Wake to the morning light of fame,  
95 And breathe again my words?

Will the young maiden, when her tears  
Alone in moonlight shine —  
Tears for the absent and the loved —  
Murmur some song of mine?  
100

Will the pale youth by his dim lamp,  
Himself a dying flame,  
From many an antique scroll beside,  
Choose that which bears my name?

Let music make less terrible  
105 The silence of the dead;  
I care not, so my spirit last  
Long after life has fled.

- Note 1: The epigraph is by Landon herself. Her title may reference Shakespeare's Sonnet 16, in which the speaker, questioning the power of art to bestow immortality, promotes the "lines of life" (line 9)—that is, the family lines engendered through the begetting of children, over the lines of poets and painters. [Return to reference 1](#)

# The Factory

'Tis an accursed thing!—<sup>1</sup>

There rests a shade above yon town,  
A dark funereal shroud:  
'Tis not the tempest hurrying down,  
'Tis not a summer cloud.

5 The smoke that rises on the air  
Is as a type and sign;  
A shadow flung by the despair  
Within those streets of thine.

10 That smoke shuts out the cheerful day,  
The sunset's purple hues,  
The moonlight's pure and tranquil ray,  
The morning's pearly dew.

15 Such is the moral atmosphere  
Around thy daily life;  
Heavy with care, and pale with fear,  
With future tumult rife.

20 There rises on the morning wind  
A low appealing cry,<sup>2</sup>  
A thousand children are resigned  
To sicken and to die!

We read of Moloch's<sup>3</sup> sacrifice,  
We sicken at the name,  
And seem to hear the infant cries—  
And yet we do the same;—



25      And worse—'twas but a moment's pain  
         The heathen altar gave,  
         But we give years,—our idol, Gain,  
         Demands a living grave!

         How precious is the little one,  
         Before his mother's sight,  
30      With bright hair dancing in the sun,  
         And eyes of azure light!

         He sleeps as rosy as the south,  
         For summer days are long;  
35      A prayer upon the little mouth,  
         Lull'd by his nurse's song.

         Love is around him, and his hours  
         Are innocent and free;  
         His mind essays its early powers  
40      Beside his mother's knee.

         When after-years of trouble come,  
         Such as await man's prime,  
         How will he think of that dear home,  
         And childhood's lovely time!

45      And such should childhood ever be,  
         The fairy well; to bring  
         To life's worn, weary memory  
         The freshness of its spring.

         But here the order is reversed,  
         And infancy, like age,  
50      Knows of existence but its worst,  
         One dull and darkened page;—

         Written with tears, and stamp'd with toil,

Crushed from the earliest hour,  
Weeds darkening on the bitter soil  
55 That never knew a flower.

Look on yon child, it droops the head,  
Its knees are bow'd with pain;  
It mutters from its wretched bed,  
60 "Oh, let me sleep again!"

Alas! 'tis time, the mother's eyes  
Turn mournfully away;  
Alas! 'tis time, the child must rise,  
And yet it is not day.

The lantern's lit—she hurries forth,  
65 The spare cloak's scanty fold  
Scarce screens her from the snowy north,  
The child is pale and cold.

And wearily the little hands  
Their task accustom'd ply;  
70 While daily, some mid those pale bands,  
Droop, sicken, pine, and die.

Good God! to think upon a child  
That has no childish days,  
No careless play, no frolics wild,  
75 No words of prayer and praise!

Man from the cradle—'tis too soon  
To earn their daily bread,  
And heap the heat and toil of noon  
80 Upon an infant's head.

To labour ere their strength be come,  
Or starve,—is such the doom  
That makes of many an English home

One long and living tomb?

85      Is there no pity from above,—  
          No mercy in those skies;  
          Hath then the heart of man no love,  
          To spare such sacrifice?

90      Oh, England! though thy tribute waves  
          Proclaim thee great and free,  
          While those small children pine like slaves,  
          There is a curse on thee!<sup>4</sup>

1835

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Something to be abhorred or shunned, perhaps alluding to Joshua 7:13: "There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel." [Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Appealing for mercy. [Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: A pagan god, mentioned in the Bible (and *Paradise Lost*), typically pictured as a terrifying idol on whose "heathen altar" (line 26) children were sacrificed. In 1830s England child labor in factories was common, and conditions dangerous, sometimes deadly; the Factory Act of 1833, which began the regulation of child labor, still permitted children as young as nine to work as many as nine hours a day, and even then enforcement of regulations was inconsistent. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Britain had abolished slavery in 1833. [Return to reference 4](#)

# The Fairy of the Fountains<sup>1</sup>

The Legend, on which this story is founded, is immediately taken from Mr. Thoms's most interesting collection. I have allowed myself some licence, in my arrangement of the story: but fairy tales have an old-established privilege of change; at least, if we judge by the various shapes which they assume in the progress of time, and by process of translation.

## Endnotes

- Note 1:  
From 1832 until her departure for Africa, Landon edited *Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrapbook*, a lavishly produced literary annual marketed, as its title suggests, as a stylish ornament for the homes of English people of taste. She wrote nearly all the verse that appeared in this annual, much of it on topics suggested by the books' pictures. "The Fairy of the Fountains" was first published in the *Drawing-Room Scrapbook*, but this poem, about forbidden sights, was not written to accompany a picture. Instead, Landon's source, as her headnote explains, was a book by the scholar who is now known mainly for being the coiner in 1846 of the term *folklore*, William J. Thoms. In

[Return to reference 1](#)

## ***Part I***

Why did she love her mother so?  
It hath wrought her wondrous woe

Once she saw an armed knight  
In the pale sepulchral night;  
When the sullen starbeams throw  
5 Evil spells on earth below;  
And the moon is cold and pale,  
And a voice is on the gale,  
Like a lost soul's heavenward cry,  
Hopeless in its agony.

10 He stood beside the castle gate,  
The hour was dark, the hour was late;  
With the bearing of a king  
Did he at the portal ring,  
And the loud and hollow bell  
15 Sounded like a Christian's knell.  
That pale child stood on the wall,  
Watching there, and saw it all.  
Then she was a child as fair  
As the opening blossoms are:  
20 But with large black eyes, whose light  
Spoke of mystery and might.

The stately stranger's head was bound  
With a bright and golden round;  
Curiously inlaid, each scale  
25 Shone upon his glittering mail;  
His high brow was cold and dim,  
And she felt she hated him.  
Then she heard her mother's voice,  
Saying, " 'Tis not at my choice!

30 Woe for ever, woe the hour,  
When you sought my secret bower,  
Listening to the word of fear,  
Never meant for human ear.  
35 Thy suspicion's vain endeavour,  
Woe! woe! parted us for ever."

Still the porter of the hall  
Heeded not that crown'd knight's call,  
When a glittering shape there came,  
With a brow of starry flame;  
40 And he led that knight again  
O'er the bleak and barren plain.  
He flung, with an appealing cry,  
His dark and desperate arms on high;  
And from Melusina's sight  
45 Fled away through thickest night.

Who has not, when but a child,  
Treasured up some vision wild;  
Haunting them with nameless fear,  
Filling all they see or hear,  
50 In the midnight's lonely hour,  
With a strange mysterious power?  
So a terror undefined  
Entered in that infant mind;—  
A fear that haunted her alone,  
55 For she told her thought to none.

Years passed on, and each one threw  
O'er those walls a deeper hue;  
Large and old the ivy leaves  
Heavy hung around the caves,  
60 Till the darksome rooms within,  
Daylight never entered in.  
And the spider's silvery line  
Was the only thing to shine.

65        Years past on,—the fair child now  
Wore maiden beauty on her brow—  
Beauty such as rarely flowers  
In a fallen world like ours.  
She was tall;—a queen might wear  
Such a proud imperial air;  
70        She was tall, yet when unbound,  
Swept her bright hair to the ground,  
Glittering like the gold you see  
On a young laburnum tree.  
Yet her eyes were dark as night,  
75        Melancholy as moonlight,  
With the fierce and wilder ray  
Of a meteor on its way.  
Lonely was her childhood's time,  
Lonelier was her maiden prime;  
80        And she wearied of the hours  
Wasted in those gloomy towers;  
Sometimes through the sunny sky  
She would watch the swallows fly,  
Making of the air a bath,  
85        In a thousand joyous rings;  
She would ask of them their path,  
She would ask of them their wings.  
Once her stately mother came,  
With her dark eye's funeral flame,  
90        And her cheek as pale as death,  
And her cold and whispering breath;  
With her sable garments bound  
By a mystic girdle<sup>o</sup> round,  
Which, when to the east she turned.  
95        With a sudden lustre burned.  
Once that ladye, dark and tall,  
Stood upon the castle wall;  
And she marked her daughter's eyes  
Fix'd upon the glad sunrise,

100 With a sad yet eager look,  
Such as fixes on a book  
Which describes some happy lot,  
Lit with joys that we have not.  
And the thought of what has been,  
105 And the thought of what might be,  
Makes us crave the fancied scene,  
And despise reality.  
'Twas a drear and desert<sup>o</sup> plain  
Lay around their own domain;  
110 But, far off, a world more fair  
Outlined on the sunny air;  
Hung amid the purple clouds,  
With which early morning shrouds  
All her blushes, brief and bright,  
115 Waking up from sleep and night,  
In a voice so low and dread,  
As a voice that wakes the dead;  
Then that stately lady said:  
"Daughter of a kingly line,—  
120 Daughter, too, of race like mine,—  
Such a kingdom had been thine;  
For thy father was a king,  
Whom I wed with word and ring.  
But in an unhappy hour,  
125 Did he pass my secret bower,—  
Did he listen to the word,  
Mortal ear hath never heard;  
From that hour of grief and pain  
Might we never meet again.  
130 "Maiden, listen to my rede,<sup>o</sup>  
Punished for thy father's deed;  
Here, an exile, I must stay,  
While he sees the light of day.  
Child, his race is mixed in thee,  
With mine own more high degree.



135 Hadst thou at Christ's altar stood,  
Bathed in His redeeming flood;  
Thou of my wild race had known  
But its loveliness alone.  
140 Now thou hast a mingled dower,  
Human passion—fairy power.  
But forefend thee from<sup>o</sup> the last:  
Be its gifts behind thee cast.  
Many tears will wash away  
145 Mortal sin from mortal clay.  
Keep thou then a timid eye  
On the hopes that fill yon sky;  
Bend thou with a suppliant knee,  
And thy soul yet saved may be;—  
150 Saved by Him who died to save  
Man from death beyond the grave."

Easy 'tis advice to give,  
Hard it is advice to take.  
Years that lived—and years to live,  
155 Wide and weary difference make.  
To that elder lady's mood,  
Suited silent solitude:  
For her lorn<sup>o</sup> heart's wasted soil  
Now repaid not hope's sweet toil.  
160 Never more could spring-flowers grow,  
On the worn-out soil below;  
But to the young Melusine,  
Earth and heaven were yet divine.  
Still illusion's purple light  
165 Was upon the morning tide,  
And there rose before her sight  
The loveliness of life untried.  
Three sweet genii,—Youth, Love, Hope,—  
Drew her future horoscope.  
Must such lights themselves consume?

170 Must she be her own dark tomb?  
But far other thoughts than these—  
Life's enchanted phantasies,  
175 Were, with Melusina now,  
Stern and dark, contracts her brow;  
And her bitten lip is white,  
As with passionate resolve.  
Muttered she,—“It is my right;  
On me let the task devolve:  
180 Since such blood to me belongs;  
It shall seek its own bright sphere;  
I will well avenge the wrongs  
Of my mother exiled here.”

• • • • •

185 Two long years are come and past,  
And the maiden's lot is cast;—  
Cast in mystery and power,  
Work'd out by the watching hour,  
By the word that spirits tell,  
By the sign and by the spell.  
190 Two long years have come and gone,  
And the maiden dwells alone.  
For the deed which she hath done,  
Is she now a banished one;—  
Banished from her mother's arms,  
195 Banished by her mother's charms,  
With a curse of grief and pain,  
Never more to meet again.  
Great was the revenge she wrought,  
Dearly that revenge was bought.  
200

When the maiden felt her powers,  
Straight she sought her father's towers.  
With a sign, and with a word,

Passed she on unseen, unheard.  
One, a pallid minstrel born  
205 On Good Friday's mystic morn,<sup>2</sup>  
Said he saw a lady there,  
Tall and stately, strange and fair,  
With a stern and glittering eye,  
Like a shadow gliding by.  
210 All was fear and awe next day,  
For the king had passed away.  
He had pledged his court at night,  
In the red grape's flowing light.  
All his pages saw him sleeping;  
215 Next day there was wail and weeping.  
Halls and lands were wandered o'er,  
But they saw their king no more.  
Strange it is, and sad to tell,  
What the royal knight befell.  
220 Far upon a desert land,  
Does a mighty mountain stand;  
On its summit there is snow,  
While the bleak pines moan below;  
And within there is a cave  
225 Opened for a monarch's grave.  
Bound in an enchanted sleep  
She hath laid him still and deep.  
She, his only child, has made  
That strange tomb where he is laid:  
230 Nothing more of earth to know,  
Till the final trumpet blow.  
Mortal lip nor mortal ear,  
Were not made to speak nor hear  
That accursed word which sealed,—  
235 All those gloomy depths concealed.  
With a look of joy and pride,  
Then she sought her mother's side.

Whispering, on her bended knee,  
"Oh! my mother, joyous be;  
240 For the mountain torrents spring  
O'er that faithless knight and king."  
Not another word she spoke,  
For her speech a wild shriek broke;  
For the widowed queen upsprung,  
245 Wild her pale thin hands she wrung.  
With her black hair falling round,  
Flung her desperate on the ground;  
While young Melusine stood by,  
With a fixed and fearful eye.  
250 When her agony was past,  
Slowly rose the queen at last;  
With her black hair, like a shroud,  
And her bearing high and proud;  
With the marble of her brow,  
255 Colder than its custom now;  
And her eye with a strange light,  
Seemed to blast her daughter's sight.  
And she felt her whole frame shrink,  
And her young heart's pulses sink;  
260 And the colour left her mouth,  
As she saw her mother signing,  
One stern hand towards the south,  
Where a strange red star was shining.  
With a muttered word and gaze,  
265 Fixed upon its vivid rays;  
Then she spoke, but in a tone,  
Her's, yet all alike her own.—  
"Spirit of our spirit-line,  
Curse for me this child of mine.  
270 Six days yield not to our powers,  
But the seventh day is ours.  
By yon star, and by our line,  
Be thou cursed, maiden mine."

275 Then the maiden felt hot pain  
Run through every burning vein.  
Sudden, with a fearful cry,  
Writhes she in her agony;  
Burns her cheek as with a flame,  
280 For the maiden knows her shame.

## Endnotes

- Note 2: People born on Good Friday supposedly had the power to see spirits.[Return to reference 2](#)

## Notes

- °: *belt*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *lonely, barren*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *advice*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *keep away from*[Return to reference °](#)
- °: *forlorn*[Return to reference °](#)

## ***Part II***

By a lovely river's side,  
Where the water-lilies glide,  
Pale, as if with constant care  
Of the treasures which they bear;  
For those ivory vases hold  
285 Each a sunny gift of gold.  
And blue flowers on the banks,  
Grow in wild and drooping ranks,  
Bending mournfully above,  
O'er the waters which they love;  
290 But which bear off, day by day,  
Their shadow and themselves away.  
Willows by that river grow  
With their leaves half green, half snow,  
Summer never seems to be  
295 Present all with that sad tree.  
With its bending boughs are wrought  
Tender and associate thought,  
Of the wreaths that maidens wear  
In their long-neglected hair.  
300 Of the branches that are thrown  
On the last, the funeral stone.  
And of those torn wreaths that suit  
Youthful minstrel's wasted lute.  
But the stream is gay to-night  
305 With the full moon's golden light,  
And the air is sweet with singing;  
And the joyous horn is ringing,  
While fair groups of dancers round  
Circle the enchanted ground.  
310 And a youthful warrior stands  
Gazing not upon those bands,

Not upon the lovely scene,  
But upon its lovelier queen,  
Who with gentle word and smile  
315 Courteous prays his stay awhile.  
The fairy of the fountains, she  
A strange and lovely mystery,  
She of whom wild tales have birth,  
When beside a winter hearth,  
320 By some aged crone is told,  
Marvel new or legend old.  
But the lady fronts<sup>o</sup> him there,  
He but sees she is so fair,  
He but hears that in her tone  
325 Dwells a music yet unknown;  
He but feels that he could die  
For the sweetness of her sigh.  
But how many dreams take flight  
With the dim enamoured night;  
330 Cold the morning light has shone,  
And the fairy train are gone,  
Melted in the dewy air,  
Lonely stands young Raymond there.  
Yet not all alone, his heart  
335 Hath a dream that will not part  
From that beating heart's recess;  
What that dream that lovers guess.

Yet another year hath flown  
In a stately hall alone,  
340 Like an idol in a shrine,  
Sits the radiant Melusine.  
It is night, yet o'er the walls,  
Light, but light unearthly, falls.  
Not from lamp nor taper thrown,  
345 But from many a precious stone,  
With whose variegated shade

Is the azure roof inlaid,  
And whose coloured radiance throws  
Hues of violet, and rose.  
350 Sixty pillars, each one shining  
With a wreath of rubies twining,  
Bear the roof—the snow-white floor  
Is with small stars studded o'er.  
Sixty vases stand between,  
355 Filled with perfumes for a queen;  
And a silvery cloud exhales  
Odours like those fragrant gales,  
Which at eve float o'er the sea  
From the purple Araby.  
360 Nothing stirs the golden gloom  
Of that dim enchanted room.  
Not a step is flitting round,  
Not a noise, except the sound.  
Of the distant fountains falling,  
365 With a soft perpetual calling,  
To the echoes which reply  
Musical and mournfully.

Sits the fairy ladye there,  
Like a statue, pale and fair;  
370 From her cheek the rose has fled,  
Leaving deeper charms instead.  
On that marble brow are wrought  
Traces of impassioned thought;  
Such as without shade or line,  
375 Leave their own mysterious sign.  
While her eyes, they are so bright,  
Dazzle with imperious light.  
Wherefore doth the maiden bend?  
Wherefore doth the blush ascend,  
380 Crimson even to her brow,  
Sight nor step are near her now?



Hidden by her sweeping robe,  
Near her stands a crystal globe,  
Gifted with strange power to show  
385 All that she desires to know.  
First she sees her palace gate,  
With its steps of marble state;  
Where two kneeling forms seem weeping  
O'er the watch which they are keeping.  
390 While around the dusky boughs  
Of a gloomy forest close,  
Not for those that blush arose.  
But she sees beside the gate,  
A young and anxious palmer<sup>o</sup> wait;  
395 Well she knows it is for her,  
He has come a worshipper.  
For a year and for a day,  
Hath he worn his weary way;  
Now a sign from that white hand,  
400 And the portals open stand.  
But a moment, and they meet,  
Raymond kneels him at her feet;  
Reading in her downcast eye,  
All that woman can reply.  
405 Weary, weary had the hours  
Passed within her fairy bowers;  
She was haunted with a dream  
Of the knight beside the stream.  
Who hath never felt the sense  
410 Of such charmed influence,  
When the shapes of midnight sleep  
One beloved object keep,  
Which amid the cares of day  
Never passes quite away?  
415 Guarded for the sweetest mood  
Of our happy solitude,  
Linked with every thing we love,

Flower below or star above:  
Sweet spell after sweet spell thrown  
420 Till the wide world is its own.  
Turned the ladye deadly pale,  
As she heard her lover's tale,  
"Yes," she said, oh! low sweet word,  
Only in a whisper heard.  
425 "Yes, if my true heart may be  
Worthy, Christian knight, of thee,  
By the love that makes thee mine  
I am deeply dearly thine.  
But a spell is on me thrown,  
430 Six days may each deed be shown,  
But the seventh day must be  
Mine, and only known to me.  
Never must thy step intrude  
On its silent solitude.  
435 Hidden from each mortal eye  
Until seven years pass by.  
When these seven years are flown,  
All my secret may be known.  
But if, with suspicious eye,  
440 Thou on those dark hours wilt pry,  
Then farewell, beloved in vain,  
Never might we meet again."  
Gazing on one worshipped brow,  
When hath lover spared a vow?  
445 With an oath and with a prayer  
Did he win the prize he sought,  
Never was a bride so fair,  
As the bride that Raymond brought  
From the wood's enchanted bowers  
450 To his old ancestral towers.  
——Oh, sweet love, could thy first prime  
Linger on the steps of time,  
Man would dream the unkind skies

Sheltered still a Paradise.  
455 But, alas, the serpent's skill  
Is amid our gardens still.  
    Soon a dark inquiring thought  
On the baron's spirit wrought:  
She, who seemed to love him so,  
460 Had she aught he might not know?  
Was it woe, how could she bear  
Grief he did not soothe nor share?  
Was it guilt? no—heaven's own grace  
Lightened in that loveliest face.  
465 Then his jealous fancies rose,  
(Our Lady keep the mind from those!)  
Like a fire within the brain,  
Maddens that consuming pain.  
Henceforth is no rest by night,  
470 Henceforth day has no delight.  
Life hath agonies that tell  
Of their late left native hell.  
But mid their despair is none  
Like that of the jealous one.  
475 'Tis again the fatal day,  
When the ladye must away,  
To her lonely palace made  
Far within the forest shade,  
Where the mournful fountains sweep  
480 With a voice that seems to weep.  
On that morn Lord Raymond's bride  
Ere the daybreak leaves his side.  
Never does the ladye speak,  
But her tears are on his cheek,  
485 And he hears a stifled moan  
As she leaves him thus alone.  
Hath she then complaint to make,  
Is there yet some spell to break?  
Come what will, of weal or woe,

490 'Tis the best the worst to know.  
He hath followed—woe, for both,  
That the knight forgot his oath.  
Where the silvery fountains fall,  
495 Stands no more the charmed hall;  
But the dismal yew trees droop,  
And the pines above them stoop,  
While the gloomy branches spread,  
As they would above the dead,  
500 In some church-yard large and drear  
Haunted with perpetual fear.  
Dark and still like some vast grave,  
Near there yawns a night-black cave.  
O'er its mouth wild ivy twines  
There the daylight never shines.  
505 Beast of prey or dragon's lair,  
Yet the knight hath entered there.  
Dimly doth the distant day  
Scatter an uncertain ray,  
While strange shapes and ghastly eyes  
510 Mid the spectral darkness rise.  
But he hurries on, and near  
He sees a sudden light appear,  
Wan and cold like that strange lamp  
Which amid the charnel's damp  
515 Shows but brightens not the gloom  
Of the corpse and of the tomb.  
With a cautious step he steals  
To the cave that light reveals.  
'Tis such grotto as might be,  
520 Nereid's<sup>3</sup> home beneath the sea.  
Crested with the small bright stars  
Of a thousand rainbow spars.  
And a fountain from the side  
Pours beneath its crystal tide,

525 In a white and marble bath  
Singing on its silvery path;  
While a meteor's emerald rays  
O'er the lucid water plays.—  
Close beside, with wild flowers laid,  
530 Is a couch of green moss made.  
There he sees his lady lie;  
Pain is in her languid eye,  
And amid her hair the dew  
Half obscures its golden hue;  
535 Damp and heavy, and unbound,  
Its wan clusters sweep around.  
On her small hand leans her head,—  
See the fevered cheek is red,  
And the fiery colour rushes  
540 To her brow in hectic blushes.—  
What strange vigil is she keeping!  
He can hear that she is weeping.—  
He will fling him at her feet,  
He will kiss away her tears.  
545 Ah, what doth his wild eyes meet,  
What below that form appears?  
Downwards from that slender waist,  
By a golden zone<sup>o</sup> embraced,  
Do the many folds escape,  
550 Of the subtle serpent's shape.—  
Bright with many-coloured dyes  
All the glittering scales arise,  
With a red and purple glow  
Colouring the waves below!  
555 At the strange and fearful sight,  
Stands in mute despair the knight,—  
Soon to feel a worse despair,  
Melusina sees him there!  
And to see him is to part  
With the idol of her heart,

560 Part as just the setting sun  
Tells the fatal day is done.  
Vanish all those serpent rings,  
To her feet the lady springs,  
565 And the shriek rings thro' the cell,  
Of despairing love's farewell,—  
Hope and happiness are o'er,  
They can meet on earth no more.

• • • • •

570 Years have past since this wild tale—  
Still is heard that lady's wail,  
Ever round that ancient tower,  
Ere its lord's appointed hour.  
With a low and moaning breath  
She must mark approaching death,  
575 While remains Lord Raymond's line  
Doomed to wander and to pine.  
Yet, before the stars are bright,  
On the evening's purple light,  
She beside the fountain stands  
580 Wringing sad her shadowy hands.  
May our Lady, as long years  
Pass with their atoning tears,  
Pardon with her love divine  
585 The fountain fairy—Melusine!<sup>4</sup>

1835

## Endnotes

- Note 3: In classical mythology, a sea nymph inhabiting an underwater cave. [Return to reference 3](#)
- Note 4: Raymond, first Lord of Lusignan, died as a hermit, at Monserrat. Melusina's was a yet harsher doom: fated to flit over

the earth, in pain and sorrow, as a spectre. Only when one of the race of Lusignan were about to die, does she become visible,—and wanders wailing around the Castle. Tradition also represents her shadow as hovering over the Fountain of Thirst. —*Thoms's Lays and Legends* [*Landon's note*]. [Return to reference 4](#)

## Notes

- °: *faces* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *pilgrim* [Return to reference °](#)
- °: *belt* [Return to reference °](#)

## Felicia Hemans<sup>1</sup>

No more, no more—O, never more returning,<sup>2</sup>  
Will thy beloved presence gladden earth;  
No more wilt thou with sad, yet anxious, yearning  
Cling to those hopes which have no mortal birth.  
5 Thou art gone from us, and with thee departed,  
How many lovely things have vanish'd too:  
Deep thoughts that at thy will to being started,  
And feelings, teaching us our own were true.  
Thou hast been round us, like a viewless<sup>o</sup> spirit,  
Known only by the music on the air;  
10 The leaf or flowers which thou hast named inherit  
A beauty known but from thy breathing there:  
For thou didst on them fling thy strong emotion,  
The likeness from itself the fond heart gave;  
As planets from afar look down on ocean,  
15 And give their own sweet image to the wave.

And thou didst bring from foreign lands their  
treasures,  
As floats thy various melody along;  
We know the softness of Italian measures,  
And the grave cadence of Castilian song.<sup>3</sup>  
20 A general bond of union is the poet,<sup>4</sup>  
By its immortal verse is language known,  
And for the sake of song do others know it—  
One glorious poet makes the world his own.  
And thou—how far thy gentle sway extended!  
25 The heart's sweet empire over land and sea;  
Many a stranger and far flower was blended  
In the soft wreath that glory bound for thee.



The echoes of the Susquehanna's waters  
Paused in the pine woods words of thine to hear;  
30 And to the wide Atlantic's younger daughters  
Thy name was lovely, and thy song was dear.<sup>5</sup>

Was not this purchased all too dearly?—never  
Can fame atone for all that fame hath cost.<sup>6</sup>  
We see the goal, but know not the endeavour,  
35 Nor what fond hopes have on the way been lost.  
What do we know of the unquiet pillow,  
By the worn cheek and tearful eyelid prest,  
When thoughts chase thoughts, like the tumultuous  
billow,  
Whose very light and foam reveals unrest?  
40 We say, the song is sorrowful, but know not  
What may have left that sorrow on the song;  
However mournful words may be, they show not  
The whole extent of wretchedness and wrong.  
They cannot paint the long sad hours, pass'd only  
45 In vain regrets o'er what we feel we are.  
Alas! the kingdom of the lute is lonely—  
Cold is the worship coming from afar.

Yet what is mind in woman but revealing  
In sweet clear light the hidden world below,  
50 By quicker fancies and a keener feeling  
Than those around, the cold and careless, know?  
What is to feed such feeling, but to culture  
A soil whence pain will never more depart?  
The fable of Prometheus and the vulture,<sup>7</sup>  
55 Reveals the poet's and the woman's heart.  
Unkindly are they judged—unkindly treated—  
By careless tongues and by ungenerous words;  
While cruel sneer, and hard reproach, repeated,  
Jar the fine music of the spirit's chords.  
Wert thou not weary—thou whose soothing numbers

60       Gave other lips the joy thine own had not?  
 Didst thou not welcome thankfully the slumbers  
           Which closed around thy mourning human lot?

65       What on this earth could answer thy requiring,  
           For earnest faith—for love, the deep and true,  
 The beautiful, which was thy soul's desiring,  
           But only from thyself its being drew.  
 How is the warm and loving heart requited  
           In this harsh world, where it awhile must dwell!  
 70       Its best affections wrong'd, betray'd, and slighted—  
           Such is the doom of those who love too well.  
 Better the weary dove should close its pinion,  
           Fold up its golden wings and be at peace;  
 Enter, O ladye, that serene dominion,  
 75       Where earthly cares and earthly sorrows cease.  
 Fame's troubled hour has clear'd, and now replying,  
           A thousand hearts their music ask of thine.  
 Sleep with a light, the lovely and undying  
           Around thy grave—a grave which is a shrine.<sup>8</sup>  
 80

1837, 1839

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Originally published in *Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrapbook* for 1838, this is the second of two elegies Landon wrote for her fellow poet; the earlier "Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans" appeared in 1835, the year of Hemans's death.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Compare *Adonais*, Shelley's elegy for Keats, line 190 (p. 857, above), as well as Hemans's own "Properzia Rossi," line 91 (p. 907, above).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: That is, from Spain. Hemans made extensive use of both Spain and Italy as romantic settings for her poetry, but Landon is likely thinking in particular of the "Songs of Spain"

and “Patriotic Lays of Italy” that Hemans published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1834.[Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: Echoing Wordsworth’s assertion that “the poet binds together . . . the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 346, above).[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The Susquehanna River flows from New York through Pennsylvania to Maryland; Landon alludes to Hemans’s great popularity among American readers.[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Hemans repeatedly treats the theme of the woman artist torn between love and ambition, bitterly weighing the price of fame, as in “Properzia Rossi.” The lonely “unquiet” imagined in this stanza is, however, much closer to Landon’s typical self-representation than to Hemans’s.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: In Greek mythology, the Titan Prometheus stole fire from heaven and gave it to humanity; for this kindness, he suffered the punishment of being chained to a mountain where a vulture (or, in other versions of the story, an eagle) arrived each day to eat away at his liver, which constantly regrew itself.[Return to reference 7](#)
- Note 8: Suggestive of Hemans’s own elegy for the poet Mary Tighe (1772–1810), “The Grave of a Poetess” (1827).[Return to reference 8](#)

## Notes

- °: *invisible*[Return to reference °](#)

# **HENRY LOUIS VIVIAN DEROZIO**

## **1809–1831**

For almost the whole of his brief life, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio lived in Calcutta (modern Kolkata). This city, upriver from the Bay of Bengal, served as the headquarters for the East India Company, the British trading corporation that had been founded in the seventeenth century and which by the nineteenth controlled vast portions of the Indian subcontinent. Calcutta was a multicultural and multilingual environment, where Arabic, Hindustani, Bengali, Persian, Sanskrit, Portuguese, and English were all in common use. Derozio's family history registers the city's cosmopolitanism. His mother, Sophia Johnson, was born in England; her brother, Arthur Johnson, owned an indigo plantation near the city of Bhajalpur. His father, Francis Derozio, was the grandson of a Portuguese trader and of a woman whose burial record identifies her as a "native Christian." One of the pen names that Henry Derozio affixed to the several poems and essays he submitted pseudonymously to the English-language newspaper the *India Gazette* starting in 1822 was "East Indian." His choice of a term that served at that time to designate individuals who were "half-caste," that is, of mixed race, was purposeful and provocative, and he reused it as the title for a newspaper of his own that he founded in 1831.

Some other pieces that Derozio submitted to the papers while he was in his early teens were signed "Juvenis"—a signature that emphasized his precocity. (Like John Keats, Felicia Hemans, and the

Shelleys, Derozio took to authoring early, strategically exploiting the opportunities for juvenile publication created by the Romantic era's new periodical press.) At age seventeen, in recognition of his record of academic excellence and the talent evident in his publications, Derozio was appointed a teacher at the "Hindoo College," a new institution designed to impart a modern, rationalistic education to Indian boys and to offer an alternative both to traditional Brahmanic education and to the Baptist mission schools also being established in India at this time. Derozio's classes, however, saddled him with a reputation for being too modern—and perhaps too much of a Westernizer as well. His pupils held debates that reminded conservative critics of the free-thinking they blamed for the French Revolution. In 1831 those pupils' parents, considering the secular bent of his teaching a threat to both Hindu and Christian orthodoxies, forced Derozio to resign his post as teacher; the East Indian Company administration connived in their campaign against him. Derozio then turned to writing full time (the preface to his 1827 debut collection, *Poems*, insists, by contrast, that "only a few hours gained from laborious daily occupations have been devoted to these poetical efforts"). He founded the *East Indian* newspaper and joined in Bengali attempts to commit the British Parliament to legal and political reforms in India. But eight months after the loss of his teaching position, he died of cholera, aged only twenty-two.

With remarkable energy, Calcutta's English-speaking inhabitants from the 1770s on had set about establishing not just schools but also local newspapers, magazines, libraries, and amateur theaters, determined to assemble the institutional infrastructure for literature and so transform their city into a literary center within the British Empire. As a poet, the author of the first books of English-language poetry to be published in India, Derozio both benefited from and continued these efforts. He thus participated in what was, in complicated ways, a nationalist project—an attempt not just to address but also to bring into being an autonomous Indian public.

Derozio's poetry marks him as a keen student of British Romanticism and reveals how British Romanticism could be turned

to new ends in an Indian context. Both in *Poems* and then in *The Fakeer of Jungheera* (1828), Derozio drew liberally on the writings of such English poets as Letitia Landon, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron—contemporaries who were based a world away and who nonetheless (as “The Romantic Imagination and the ‘Oriental Nations’ ” suggests) were eager to treat Britain’s Indian empire as a source of alluringly exotic and marketable poetic materials. He evidently took inspiration, too, from the translations of Sir William Jones, who had argued in 1772 that European poetry could be reinvigorated by sidelining the examples long provided by Greek and Latin texts and turning instead to “the poetry of the Eastern nations.” And yet Derozio actually set several poems in Greece, sometimes reiterating the canonical Western narrative of Athenians’ commitment to the preservation of liberty and sometimes referencing the efforts that nineteenth-century Greeks were then making to throw off the yoke of Ottoman rule. He gravitated, in addition, toward the subject matter and even the idioms of Irish and Scottish authors such as Thomas Moore, Robert Burns, and Walter Scott. One of his short lyrics is titled “Here’s a Health to Thee, Lassie!”

Even in his sonnet “The Harp of India” or in the untitled patriotic sonnet given the name “To India—My Native Land” by a later editor—poems that were lauded by later generations of Indians as founding texts of a national canon and that became staples of modern Indian schoolrooms—Derozio made no secret of having assembled an idiom for national identity in large part from non-Indian sources. We have included in this section the Anglo-Irish poet Thomas Moore’s “Dear Harp of My Country” (1815) from his collection *Irish Melodies*, a famous song about the retrieval of a once-silenced national music, so as to bring to view both Derozio’s ways of reinventing British Romanticism’s most charismatic symbols and his ways of evoking a transnational literary dialogue. The models provided by Romantic-period Irish and Scottish writers might have been attractive to Derozio precisely because those writers too had to negotiate between articulating ideals of cultural autonomy—

of creative distinctiveness—and acknowledging the realities of political domination they experienced as inhabitants of Britain's peripheries.

Reviewers at the time were slightly nonplussed by Derozio's cosmopolitanism and sometimes regretted that in his books authentic Indian materials felt hard to find, even while echoes of Western materials they already knew were spotted all too easily. Twenty-first-century critics are, on the contrary, inclined to applaud the allusiveness and the polyphony of those books. Those qualities, they propose, might be construed as evidence that Derozio both realized what was coercive about an imperial readership's demand for Indian authenticity and preemptively resisted it.

# The Harp of India<sup>1</sup>

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?  
Unstrung, for ever, must thou there remain?  
Thy music once was sweet—who hears it now?  
Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?—  
Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;  
5 Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,  
Like ruined monument on desert plain:—  
O! many a hand more worthy far than mine  
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave,  
And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine  
10 Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's grave:  
Those hands are cold—but if thy notes divine  
May be by mortal wakened once again,  
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!

1827

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This sonnet opened *Poems*, Derozio's first book.[Return to reference 1](#)



# THOMAS MOORE: Dear Harp of My Country<sup>1</sup>

## *I*

Dear Harp of my Country! in darkness I found thee,  
The cold chain of silence had hung o'er thee long,  
When proudly, my own Island Harp! I unbound thee,  
And gave all thy chords to light, freedom, and  
song!  
5 The warm lay of love and the light note of gladness  
Have waken'd thy fondest, thy liveliest thrill;  
But, so oft hast thou echoed the deep sigh of  
sadness,  
That ev'n in thy mirth it will steal from thee still.

## *II*

Dear Harp of my Country! farewell to thy numbers,  
10 This sweet wreath of song is the last we shall  
twine;  
Go, sleep, with the sunshine of Fame on thy  
slumbers,  
Till touch'd by some hand less unworthy than  
mine.  
If the pulse of the patriot, soldier, or lover,  
Have throbb'd at our lay, 'tis thy glory alone;  
15 I was *but* as the wind, passing heedlessly over,  
And all the wild sweetness I wak'd was thy own.

1815

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Also titled “The Farewell to My Harp,” Moore’s song was included in the sixth number of *Irish Melodies*, a multivolume project for which Moore (1779–1852) wrote original poems—a mix of drinking songs, versified Gaelic legends, and elegies for fallen rebels and patriots from Ireland’s past—that he matched to traditional tunes. This collection made Irish music palatable as polite drawing-room entertainment in England, and in the later, 20th-century literary history of Ireland was much criticized for doing so. The last four lines of “Dear Harp of My Country” appear as an epigraph on the title page of Derozio’s *Poems*. [Return to reference 1](#)

# Freedom to the Slave

"And as the slave departs, the man returns."

—CAMPBELL.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

How felt he when he first was told  
A slave he ceased to be;  
How proudly beat his heart, when first  
He knew that he was free!—  
5 The noblest feelings of the soul  
To glow at once began;  
He knelt no more; his thoughts were raised;  
He felt himself a man.  
He looked above—the breath of Heaven  
Around him freshly blew;  
10 He smiled exultingly to see  
The wild birds as they flew.  
He looked upon the running stream  
That 'neath him rolled away;  
Then thought on winds, and birds, and floods,  
15 And cried, "I'm free as they!"  
Oh Freedom! there is something dear  
E'en in thy very name,  
That lights the altar of the soul  
With everlasting flame.  
20 Success attend the patriot sword,  
That is unsheathed for thee!  
And glory to the breast that bleeds,  
Bleeds nobly to be free!  
Blest be the generous hand that breaks  
25 The chain a tyrant gave,  
And feeling for degraded man

Gives freedom to the slave.

1827

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Derozio's epigraph is from the long philosophical poem *The Pleasures of Hope* (1799), by the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell (1777–1844), part 1, line 348. The hopes that Campbell's title references include those aroused by the beginnings of the French Revolution, and the poem denounces West Indian slavery and the British exploitation of India.[Return to reference 1](#)

# Ode

*from the Persian of Hafiz.*<sup>1</sup>

FREELY TRANSLATED.

Say, what's the rose without the smile  
Of her I deem more fair,  
And what are all the sweets of spring  
If wine be wanting there?  
5 O! who will pause the choice to doubt  
Of walks where music rings,  
Or bowers in richest bloom without  
The notes the Bulbul<sup>2</sup> sings?  
In vain the cypress waves, in vain  
A thousand flowrets sigh,  
10 Without the cheek whose tint excels  
The tulip's crimson dye!  
Yet what are lips where sweetness clings,  
And cheeks where roses dwell.  
Without the kiss, the joy, the bliss  
15 Of pleasure's potent spell?  
The wine and garden both are sweet,  
But sweetest wine and grove  
I lothe, if there I cannot meet  
The face and form I love.  
20 The brightest, fairest works of art  
That skilful hands devise  
Are nought, without the hand and heart  
Of her I fondest prize.  
And what's my life?—perhaps a coin—  
25 A trifling coin at best—

Unheeded e'en by passer-by  
Unfit for bridal guest.<sup>3</sup>

1826

1827

## Endnotes

- Note 1: Hafiz was a lyric poet in 14th-century Persia. In his 1772 *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Tongues*, Sir William Jones had included "A Persian Song of Hafiz," which he compared to a sonnet of Petrarch's.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: Hindi word for nightingale.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3: This alludes to a custom in the East, of throwing money away among the guests at a bridal [*Derozio's note*].[Return to reference 3](#)

# The Ruins of Rajmahal<sup>1</sup>

No serf has lighted yon Kiosk,<sup>o</sup>  
There's no Muezzin<sup>2</sup> in the Mosque,  
No vesper hymn, no morning prayer  
Shall be put up, or answered there;  
5 The sacred hall, the holy sod  
By unbelievers' feet are trod,  
And ruthless hands have reft away<sup>3</sup>  
The marble that might mock decay!  
No revel's held in yon Dulan,<sup>4</sup>  
10 No priest from hallowed Al Koran  
A verse in solemn strain shall read,  
Nor faithful Moslem chaunt his creed,  
Where many a sage enthusiast  
Has worshipped—but that day is past!  
15 The weed is on the sable wall,  
That wild-dog's howling in the hall,  
The broken column's scatter'd by;  
And hark! the owlet's dismal cry  
Is driven through the lattice high;—  
20 A moonbeam's gleaming through the cleft  
That Ruin half reluctant left;  
Yet onward went he, and his march  
Is shown by what was once an arch;  
And many a shatter'd step, and stone  
Where lights the foot with faltering tread,  
25 But sadly speak of what is gone,  
As relics whisper of the dead.  
These are like some celestial tone  
Of music that undying fled,  
To which (though ne'er the hallow'd strain

30 May e'en in echo wake again)  
The memory is rivetted!

I would not have the day return  
That saw these wrecks in all their pride—  
As he who weeps o'er Beauty's urn  
35 Feels what he felt not by her side,  
A gloom that gives to sorrow zest!  
A pang that's welcome to the breast!

The wave has bleached the buttress' base,  
Where but few stones have lost their place,  
40 Although the massive tenement  
Is parted from itself—it stands:  
Majestic pile! Time never rent  
A nobler work of mortal hands!  
The stranger, though no child of fame,  
45 Upon thy walls hath writ his name<sup>5</sup>—  
O! would that he had left to thee  
A worthier, dearer legacy!  
How eloquent is all around!  
How all-surpassing mortal sound!  
50 There's music in the moonlit stream;  
There's beauty in the lunar beam;  
There's sacred stillness in each star  
That shines in cloudless skies afar,  
But most these very stones impart  
55 A lesson to the human heart.  
Perhaps they say to him whose gaze  
Is fixed on them; "In after days,  
Such e'en may be thy hapless fate,  
Forlorn—neglected—desolate!"  
60 Their lot unshared, and sad, and lone,  
Perhaps reminds him of his own;  
Or bids him turn with fond regret  
To-times he never can forget,



65 When his was yet a tranquil mind,  
Whose memory's all that's left behind!  
These thoughts, like clouds, have gather'd o'er me—  
Enough of them—a wreck's before me:  
Three marble columns still are there,  
70 That Desolation fail'd t'impair;  
Save these, each baseless pillar hath  
Well helped to pave the spoiler's path.

On, stranger! on, nor start at things  
That mock the pride and power of kings—  
But Shoojah<sup>6</sup> thought such hapless fate  
75 Could ne'er the golden Mosque await,  
Nor could the mighty monarch deem  
Its wreck would be the Poet's theme.  
Why should it not? My native land  
Is that which he did once command—  
80 And though her sons to fame are dead,  
Her spirit is not wholly fled;  
For while her rivers glisten sheen,  
And roll their fertile hanks between,  
And while her mist-clad mountains rear  
85 Their peaks, as if to pierce the sky,  
In memory's page shall live the year  
Of glory that has long gone by—  
And while her fields shall flourish green,  
Some trace shall be of what has been,—  
90 Its image, though in darkness cast,  
A holy relic of the past;  
A dazzling meteor fleeting by,  
An Iris<sup>7</sup> in a cloudy sky;  
A vesper breeze in summer shade,  
95 A sunbeam in the gloomy glade—  
A rose-bud in the wilderness!

Farewell, ye wrecks! alas! ye wear

100 The haggard wildness of despair,  
 A darkness that beseems you well,  
 A gloom that binds you like a spell;  
 Yet e'en in this your day of ill,  
 A halo circles round you still,  
 And wakes a passion all may feel,  
 That none can tell, nor yet conceal.  
 105 And there ye stand in mournful mood,  
 Like woman in her widowhood.  
 Farewell! how fallen in your crest!  
 How sunk your pride!—but let that rest—  
 Ye well the tears of grief beguile,  
 110 I fain would linger yet awhile  
 To gaze on you, but not unmoved—  
 As lovers look on what they loved!  
 This is my last, but it shall dwell  
 Within my heart through life—Farewell!  
 115

1826 **Endnotes** 1827

- Note 1: After the conquest of Bengal in the late 16th century made it a province of Akbar the Great's Mughal Empire, Rajmahal, on the bank of the Ganges, served briefly as the provincial capital. In the 19th century the remnants of its mosque and palace were often visited by British travelers and artists with a taste for picturesque ruins. The scenery might have functioned for some as a reminder that a past empire had collapsed into ruin and that, at some future moment, Britain's Indian empire might follow suit.[Return to reference 1](#)
- Note 2: The person in Islamic religious communities who proclaims the call to prayer.[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 3:  
 In a note at the end of his book, Derozio comments at length on this line. He begins as follows: "Lord Elgin robbed Greece of her ruins, and none but those of 'gentle blood' have had

opportunities of following his example.” His reference is to how between 1801 and 1812 the Scottish aristocrat the Earl of Elgin removed about half the ancient sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens—supposedly with the permission of the Ottoman government of Greece—and had them shipped to London, where they were eventually exhibited by the British Museum. Derozio introduces the topic with a slightly altered quotation from a passage in Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, cant [Return to reference 3](#)

- Note 4: A hall [*Derozio’s note*].[Return to reference 4](#)
- Note 5: The walls of the Mosque and of the Hall are covered with the names of European and native travellers [*Derozio’s note*, keyed to a long endnote first remarking on the neglect of the ancient buildings and then praising Augustus Cleveland, the East India Company administrator whose title was collector for the District of Bihar, who, fifty years earlier, had kept them in good order].[Return to reference 5](#)
- Note 6: Shoojah Shah built the Singhee Dulan and Sona Musjid [*Derozio’s note*, referencing buildings also known as the Marble Pavilion and the Golden Mosque]. Shah Shujah (1616–1671) was the governor of the Mughal provinces of Bengal and Odisha.[Return to reference 6](#)
- Note 7: Goddess of the rainbow in Greek mythology.[Return to reference 7](#)

## Notes

- °: *pavilion*[Return to reference °](#)

## [To India]<sup>1</sup>

My country! in thy day of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,  
And worshipped as a deity thou wast—  
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?  
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,  
5 And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou:  
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee  
Save the sad story of thy misery!—  
Well—let me dive into the depths of time,  
And bring from out the ages that have rolled  
10 A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime,  
Which human eye may never more behold;  
And let the guerdon<sup>o</sup> of my labour be  
My fallen country! one kind wish for thee!

1828

## Endnotes

- Note 1: This sonnet was placed, untitled, at the start of Derozio's 1828 volume *The Fakeer of Jungheera, a Metrical Tale; and Other Poems*. It is often reprinted as "To India—My Native Land," a title invented by an early 20th-century editor.[Return to reference 1](#)

## Notes

- <sup>o</sup>: reward[Return to reference <sup>o</sup>](#)